

**WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY
BENEDICTINE COMMUNITY OF ROSTREVOR
19.01.2014**

Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem...the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth...
[John 4.21, 23]

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, please allow me to begin this address by expressing the genuine joy that this community of Holy Cross has brought to everyone who has come into contact with it over the ten years of its existence. Ten years ago this monastery was consecrated; throughout these ten years the brothers have **lived** the vocation that they set out from the beginning to become: “a house of prayer for all the nations.” Since 2004 the charism of hospitality, and the openness of the community to all those who know themselves to be in need of the solace of compassionate friendship, has touched hearts and lives in ways that once may have seen beyond reasonable expectation, but which express that authentic characteristic of the Divine Will, inadequately conveyed, in the mystery and language of Love.

I came here first as a baby bishop. I returned to seek a disciplined silence when preparing for my translation to Armagh; and I have been sustained by the prayers of the community offered regularly here for me and my brothers and sisters in the Church of Ireland. Such debts cannot be re-paid but they must not go unacknowledged.

We find ourselves embarked today upon another iteration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Many would say that our idealized goal of deep union in and through the love of Christ seems overlong in coming, apparently indefinitely delayed. I take a contrary view. We could do worse than compare our hopes with those of St Paul and the early Church, impatiently awaiting the Parousia, a Second Coming, an Apocalypse. Two millennia later that apostolic expectation remains unfulfilled. It reminds us to commit ourselves to patient continuance in well-doing and to seek to frame our work in the contexts of eternity.

The Gospel arms us with insights for our journey. We are encouraged, for example, to consider the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well, near Sychar – Shechem perhaps – described in chapter 4 of the 4th Gospel.

Here is an account rich in historic and mystic resonance, symbolism and allegory. I have been giving renewed thought in recent days to the importance of allegory. Indeed, I am tempted to ask whether or not the whole passage about the Samaritan woman should not be seen – in whole or in part – as at the very least allegorical in character.

You cannot be unaware of the extent to which, time and again in the Hebrew Scriptures, places where water wells to the surface are places of life changing if not game changing encounters. Both well and meeting are allegorical. We meet, figuratively, at the Well today, to drink together from the mystical source of the Water of Life. St John the Divine observed the river of the water of life springing from the throne of God, its banks supporting the Tree of Life with its twelve kinds of fruit, and bearing leaves that are for the healing of the nations. In unity week we meet to be healed and drink from the water that wells up from beneath the throne of Grace.

Jesus met a woman at a well and the layers of meaning concealed in this Gospel story peel back one after another like an onion:

Jesus had a journey to make, going north from Judea to Galilee. The journey required that he either by-pass or pass through ancient Samaria – once the heartland of the Kingdom of Israel but now the heartland of a sect regarded by Jews as heretical. Jesus strode ahead of the main party of the disciples – alone and unprotected in potentially hostile territory. There were no passport controls, no ‘Border Agency’, but Jesus was crossing territorial boundaries that marked out also barriers of culture and religion. The initiative in all of this was solely Christ’s, it becomes our example! It was as if the route was chosen deliberately to exemplify to his followers his and their direction of travel in life. There was no barrier Jesus would not cross, no company he would not keep, to come alongside people. Prostitutes, tax collectors, occupying Roman soldiery, lepers, the blind, deaf, dumb, physically incapacitated, beggars, heretics: he even sought the company of lawyers.

It is also seriously striking the number of times Jesus defied convention in his open and generous acceptance of women and the ministry of women. Here, in choosing to interact with an un-chaperoned woman – and a Samaritan at that – Jesus overthrew the norms of social etiquette, quite prepared to embrace the inevitable public opprobrium. I remind you, this was an un-chaperoned woman, a stranger, a heretic, a serial adulteress (or worse), and there was no-one to vouch for the propriety of their interactions: it was the middle of the day and everyone else was wisely enjoying a siesta in the shade.

As I read this story my mind immediately flies to another significant encounter involving a well: the first encounter of Jacob with Rachel – bear in mind, the place where Jesus met the woman of Samaria was also known as Jacob’s Well. Jacob had fled from the wrath of Esau, his twin, to find sanctuary with Laban, his mother’s brother. Resting beside a well he set eyes on Rachel and was smitten. He married Rachel but only after being required first to marry Leah her sister. Between them the sisters gave Jacob twelve sons, the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. All twelve were born before Jacob returned to Canaan. The ancient “well of meeting” in culturally alien, far off Haran, gave rise to the Israelite nation. Great changes arise through meetings at a well. Jacob was re-named Israel after wrestling with God on the way home to Canaan.

Wells are the source and the stuff of life – water springing from the rock, welling up from the ground, giving life to that dust from which all flesh is made and to which it will return.

St John records the first of the signs that pointed to the power and person of Jesus at the Marriage at Cana of Galilee where the water of purification became the wine of the matrimonial feast.

Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again of water and the spirit; he told the woman of Samaria that the water he will give will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

It was at ‘the Sheep Pool’, Bethzatha, that Jesus healed the paralysed man who could not bathe unaided in the healing waters – the third of the “signs” that John set out, so that ‘you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.’ [Jn 20.31]

So then, crossing boundaries, drinking together at the fountain of life, defying convention, these things set the agenda for Unity Week.

But what of the conversation – it is conversation that opened the Samaritan woman's eyes and changed her understanding. At the beginning it was a pretty brisk exchange too: *Give me some water...How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?* The exchange begins in a request for help, for a gift, for a kindness; and is it not the case that the person who makes the request places himself in the position of a supplicant, and the person of whom the request is made in the position of a benefactor? Jesus addresses the woman not from a position of power but from a posture of need. He hands the initiative and therefore conveys superior status to her – to her great surprise. Jesus says, *Look, we don't know one another. If you did fully understand who I am and what is the true source of genuinely life giving water, the request for water would have come from you to me, not me to you.*

The conversation goes on to explore what Jesus means by 'living water' and how it might be acquired. He then reveals that nothing about the woman is hidden from him. I am very moved by this part of their conversation. Every detail of her colourful life is, as it were, an open book to Jesus. It is this revelation of his deep power of discernment, and especially of his understanding of her deep but unsatisfied need of love despite a multitude of partners, that convinces the Samaritan Woman that Jesus is a prophet. It brings us to the heart of the matter for those of us who would cross the boundaries of division in religion in Unity Week because Jesus gave that woman acceptance and respect even though there was nothing about her turbulent and dysfunctional life he didn't already know. Jesus saw deep inside her, he understood her deepest need, her thirst for a life healed and restored, and he healed her heart by opening his heart.

Tragically, we don't behave like that. We pout at one another instead of opening our hearts to one another: You lot think this, whereas we **know** that; you worship in this place and in this way; we worship in our place and in **the right way**; you think God is like this, we **know** God is nothing like what you think!

This is the Tale of Two Mountains: Mount Zion and Mount Gerizim – for which read Rome or Canterbury or Jerusalem or Geneva or Constantinople de-da-de-da-de-da – the range of hills, the varieties of sacred sanctuaries has grown in two millennia. And the lesson is this: None of our cherished religious shibboleths are essential or sufficient for the true worship of God. They may be a help (although sometimes I wonder) but they are not the inner core. At one and the same time they enhance and undermine understanding. They have about them the frailties of all that is temporal. In the tide of history they may find themselves superseded or vacated. They may be hugely symbolic, they are not the rounded, essential whole. In the economy of God all our shrines – the shrines with which we endue the genius of each denominationally variant understanding of the revelation of God – all our shrines will be toppled, and every comfortable symbol will have to be replaced by a unity of will, purpose and approbation in a heart set free and set afire in burning contemplation of the indwelling, all encompassing, all consuming God mystery.

My last word, therefore, is this: in so far as it is attainable at all, Christian Unity arises as, one by one, folk, by different routes of their own making, cross the boundaries of prejudice and perception to find their unity in the common journey, the winding quest. We set out from our shrines – our holy mountains – we become one as, by whatever route and from whatever starting point, we approach the source of Grace. And lo, as we do so, and as heart speaks to

heart in recognition of mutual dignity and mutual need, we find our unity in Christ intrinsically complete.