

Call to Worship

Hymn: Paraphrase 18 (CH4 715) vvs 1,3 5,6,7
Behold! The mountain of the Lord

Glasgow

Prayer

Let us pray.
Living God,
From dry dust You called us,
And watered our lives with countless streams and great rivers.
Send Your living waters upon us,
That our parched lives may be like wellsprings:
Sources of life and truth and grace.
We think of all who thirst for Your water.
Remind us of all the thirsts in this world:
The thirst for forgiveness,
The thirst for peace,
The thirst for opportunity,
The thirst for reconciliation,
The thirst for hope.
Touch us, once more, with the memory of our baptism,
Where through the waters, blessing came to us.
Rain down your blessings on us once again,
And prepare us to encounter You and Yours
By wells of living water,
In cafés, halls and kitchens,
And every place where fellowship and drinking
Will go together
Teach us to cup our hands
And gently, graciously, in solidarity
Share with one another and with You.
In the Name of Christ, the Living Water.
Amen

Reflection: Word of Life – Water
John 4:7-15

The poet Philip Larkin wrote:

*“If I were called on
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.”*

Nearly all religions make use of water. The Book of Genesis links the origins of humanity with the springing up of water. Our emergence from dry dust is linked to the flowing of water. Jesus began his ministry by emerging from the water of the Jordan. Water was such a powerful image that Early Christians thought that all water was blessed.

At the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA last June, as you entered the hall in Portland, Oregon, commissioners were greeted by a huge glass font filled with water. It is an echo of the medieval tradition of placing fonts at the entrances of church naves to remind people as they entered that they were baptised.

I have chosen water as today's Word of Life. Its use in Scripture and in the world is never far from sacramental. Water gives life. When there is no rain, the land is dry, the crops die, and people are made hungry. How many days can anyone live without water?

Water is not a straightforward image for life. Too much or too little can be devastating. Water can give life and take away life. It is likely that water will gain even more importance in the years to come. In a recent environmental appeal the Archbishop of Cape Town asked for the developed world to change its lifestyle in order that the water of the world might be shared better. Although 75% of the earth's surface is covered by water, less than 1% is usable by humans – soon it is feared we will compete for less water. Wars in the past have been fought over land and oil, in the future it may well be water.

There is no record of Jesus baptising anyone during His ministry, but I can't help but feel that in this edgy encounter at

the well with the Samaritan woman, there is something sacramental going on.

By the water at that well, I really wish Jesus had asked the woman what her name was – maybe He did, but the Bible doesn't comment. The woman isn't named. Nicodemus, earlier in the gospel, arrives and departs in darkness; this woman comes in the full brightness of the noonday sun.

There they are: the weary Saviour, sitting at Jacob's well, on His own, a stranger in a strange land, thirsty, and without any means of drawing water from its depths. And the nameless woman, with her difficult past, coming to the well when no-one would be around to judge her or accuse her or denounce her, because it was in the heat of the day. Around water, barriers are both defined and made fluid. In this encounter the male Jewish rabbi should not be speaking to a Samaritan woman. Many assume that she was broken and hurting, but it is not evident, though it may be true. I was reminded of the Cosmopolitan editor who once said that, "Good girls go to

heaven; bad girls go everywhere.”ⁱ This Samaritan lady had clearly been around.

With the water of life around them, maybe even between them, with probable levels of tension being hinted at, what was Jesus’ response? Not judgement. Not exclusion. Simply encounter and interest. Like the time when a woman who had dabbled in prostitution came to see a priest: “But Father,” she said, “I am a fallen woman!” “No, my dear,” he replied, “you merely tripped.”ⁱⁱ Jesus spoke, she spoke. No cold shoulder.

Jesus didn’t name her, He certainly didn’t baptise her, but this is a sacramental moment. In the welcome and the acceptance, through the metaphor of the living water that was between them something sacramental happens. Here is a sign of the graciousness of God. Here is a symbol, a word of life in water that speaks of the presence of the Spirit of God.

In baptism the symbolism of water is not simply about cleansing, it is about inclusion. Martin Luther, feeling discouraged on one occasion, reminded himself: “I am

baptised, and through my baptism God, Who cannot lie, has bound Himself in covenant with me.”ⁱⁱⁱ At the well of living water, Jesus engaged with a nameless woman, and though there was no literal baptism, I can’t help but believe that the beginnings of a spiritual one took place. The woman not only began to understand a little more about herself, she began to discover a little more about Jesus. She became more fully alive. She asked questions. She came seeking water to drink, and engaged with an equally thirsty Saviour, also seeking water. Through the living water they encountered each other, and, it may just be, she had a new beginning.

Water is a powerful word of life. Water in baptism is a powerful symbol of God’s Spirit washing over us, reminding us of God’s love and God’s new beginnings. Christianity will flourish in the C21st if we grasp that the Church is above all the community of the baptised. Not a closed cistern, but an open well with a spring of living water. Baptism may seem like an unremarkable event, in essence the splash of a little water, and the uttering

of a few words.^{iv} But it is the wet symbol of God's grace and welcome. If water is a word of life, might it be that we are to live as God's wet Christians, drenched in God's grace and love, and not as desiccated fossils drained of human kindness and joy and welcome and wonder?

The woman and the well and the Saviour; an unexpected conversation took place between unexpected people meeting beyond convention and across boundaries; the living water flowing beneath them and around them. They were both thirsty for water, the water of life; the water that had unexpectedly brought sinner and Saviour together. We will never know if it ended with baptising and naming, but we do know that it started with a little cup of cool water, offered in love; the beginning of a journey to salvation through inclusion and grace. How thirsty are you?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

Prayer (including Prayer of Constitution)

Let us pray.

Fluid God,

Ebbing and flowing and eddying

Around the continents and islands of our lives,

Wash us, cleanse us and renew us.

Into our desert hearts and souls,

Let streams of living water flow that we,

Your people, might flourish and bear fruit.

In our prayers today we hold before You

The many places where living water must run

So that new life and vision might come:

Into our politics, where division of opinion

Has hardened into prejudice and fear – send living water;

Into our economics, where selfishness and fear

Have drained goodwill and generosity – send living water;

Into our society, where ignorance and isolation

Have fragmented communities and homes – send living water.

Into our lives, where we have grown stale and stagnant,

Far from the openness and grace You shaped us for – send

living water.

God bless our Queen with wisdom and energy.

God bless Her Grace, and surround her with travelling mercies

on this day as she performs her duties.

God bless Your Church, Your communities of the baptised,

That we, each day, may live as 'wet' Christians in the world,

Fluid and flourishing and faithful in all we do.

Hear our prayers for this General Assembly,

As now we constitute ourselves a court of Christ's Church,

And hear us now as we are bold to pray:

Our Father

Which art in Heaven

Hallowed be Thy Name.

Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth

As it is in Heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory.
Forever.
Amen

Hymn: 635 We know that Christ is raised and dies no more
Engelberg

ⁱ Timothy Radcliffe, 'Take the Plunge', p136

ⁱⁱ *ibid*, p155

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther, 'The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism', Luther's Works vol 35

^{iv} Radcliffe, p1