

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 17 - 24 May, 2015



Photo: Russell Falls, Tasmania by Jen Tutin

*Jesus said to her: "Give me
to drink". (John 4:7)*

BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS AND PRAYERS FOR THE "EIGHT DAYS"

DAY 1

PROCLAMATION

It is necessary to go through Samaria

(John 4:4)

Genesis 24:10-33

Psalms 42

2 Corinthians 8:1-7

John 4:1-4

Abraham and Rebekah at the well

The deer that longs for running streams

The generosity of the churches of Macedonia

He had to go through Samaria

Reflection

Jesus and his disciples travelled from Judea to Galilee. Samaria is between these two areas. There was a certain prejudice against Samaria and the Samaritans. The negative reputation of Samaria came from its mix of races and religions. It was not uncommon to use alternative routes to avoid stepping into Samaritan territory.

What does the Gospel of John mean, then, when saying, “it is necessary to go through Samaria”? More than a geographical issue, it is a choice of Jesus: “going through Samaria” means that it is necessary to meet the other, the different, the one who is often seen as a threat.

The conflict between Jews and Samaritans was old. Samaritan predecessors had broken with the monarchy of the south, which required the centralization of the worship in Jerusalem (1 Kings 12). Later, when the Assyrians invaded Samaria deporting many of the local population, they brought to the territory a number of foreign peoples, each with their own gods or deities (2 Kings 17:24-34). For Jews, Samaritans became a people “mixed and impure”. Later in John’s Gospel, the Jews, wanting to discredit Jesus, accuse him saying, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” (Jn 8:48).

Samaritans in their turn also had difficulty accepting Jews (Jn 4:8). The hurt of the past became even greater when, around 128 BC, the Jewish leader, John Hyrcanus, destroyed the temple built by Samaritans as their place of worship on Mount Gerizim. On at least one occasion, reported in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus was not received in a Samaritan city simply because he was on his way to Judea (Lk 9:52). So resistance to dialogue came from both sides.

John makes it clear that “going through Samaria” is a choice Jesus is making; he is reaching beyond his own people. In this he is showing us that isolating ourselves from those who are different and relating only to people like ourselves is a self-inflicted impoverishment. It is the dialogue with those who are different that makes us grow.

Questions

1. What does it mean for me and for my community of faith "to have to go through Samaria?"
2. What are the steps that my church has taken to meet other churches and what have the churches learnt from each other?
3. What are the steps that my church has taken to meet people and groups of other religions, and what has been learnt from this?

Prayer

God of all peoples, teach us to go through Samaria to meet our brothers and sisters from other churches and other faiths. Allow us to go there with open hearts so we may learn from every church, culture and religion. We confess that you are the source of unity and peace. Grant us the unity that Christ wills for us, the peace that Christ offers us. Amen.

DAY 2

DENUNCIATION I

Tired of the journey, Jesus sat down facing the well. (*John 4:6*)

Genesis 29:1-14	Jacob and Rachel at the well
Psalms 137	How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?
1 Cor 1:10-18	Each one of you says, "I am for Paul," or "I am for Apollos"
John 4:5-6	Jesus was tired out by his journey

Reflection

Jesus had been in Judea before his encounter with the Samaritan woman. The Pharisees had begun to spread the word that Jesus baptized more disciples than John. Perhaps this rumour has caused some tension and discomfort. Perhaps it is the reason behind Jesus' decision to leave.

Arriving at the well, Jesus decides to stop. He was tired from his journey. His fatigue could also be related to the rumours. While he was resting, a Samaritan woman came near the well to fetch water. This meeting took place at Jacob's well: a symbolic place in the life and spirituality of the people of the Bible.

A dialogue begins between the Samaritan woman and Jesus about the place of worship. "Is it on this mountain or in Jerusalem?" asks the Samaritan woman. Jesus answers, "neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him" (Jn 4: 21- 24).

It still happens that instead of a common search for unity, competition and dispute mark the relations between the churches. This has been the experience of Brazil in recent years. Communities extol their own virtues and the benefits that accrue to their adherents in order to attract new members. Some think that the bigger the church, the larger its number of members, the greater its power, the closer they are to God, presenting themselves as the only true worshippers. As a result there has been violence and disrespect to other religions and traditions. This type of competitive marketing creates both distrust between the churches and a lack of credibility in society towards Christianity as a whole. As competition grows the "other" community becomes the enemy.

Who are the true worshippers? True worshippers do not allow the logic of competition - who is better and who is worse - to infect faith. We need "wells" to lean upon, to rest and let go of disputes, competition and violence, places where we can learn that true worshippers worship "in Spirit and in Truth."

Questions

1. What are the main reasons for competition among our churches?
2. How might disputes and disagreements be addressed and overcome in local churches?
3. Are we able to identify a common 'well' upon which we can lean and rest from our disputes and competition?
4. Discuss the statement: "Success is not a name of God."

Prayer

Gracious God, often our churches are led to choose the logic of competition. Forgive our sin of presumption. We are weary from this need to be first. Allow us to rest at the well. Refresh us with the water of unity drawn from our common prayer. May your Spirit who hovered over the waters of chaos bring unity from our diversity and calm in our uncertainty. Amen.

DAY 3

DENUNCIATION II

"I have no husband". (*John 4:17*)

2 Kings 17:24-34 Samaria conquered by Assyria

Psalms 139:1-12 "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me"

Romans 7:1-4 "You have died to the law through the body of Christ"

John 4:16-19 "I have no husband"

Reflection

The Samaritan woman answers Jesus, "I have no husband." The topic of conversation is now about the married life of the woman. There is a shift in terms of the content of their dialogue - from water to husband. "Go, call your husband and come back" (Jn 4:16), but Jesus knows the woman has had five husbands, and the man she is with now is not her husband.

What is this woman's situation? Did her husband ask for divorce? Was she a widow? Did she have children? These questions arise naturally when dealing with this narrative. However, it seems that Jesus was interested in another dimension of the woman's situation. He acknowledges the woman's life but remains open to her, to truly encounter her. Jesus does not insist on a moral interpretation of her answer but seems to want to lead her beyond both the situation and its interpretation. And as a result the woman's attitude towards Jesus changes. At this point, the obstacles of cultural and religious differences fade into the background, thereby giving space for something much more important: an encounter in trust. Jesus' behaviour in this moment allows us to open new windows and raise further questions: questions that challenge the attitudes that denigrate and marginalize women; and questions about the differences which we allow to stand in the way of the unity we seek and for which we pray.

Questions

1. What are the sinful structures that we can identify in our own communities?
2. What is the place and the role of women and minority groups in our churches and in our society?
3. What can our churches do to prevent violence and to overcome violence directed against women and girls?
4. What sort of things prevent us from really encountering 'the other' and allowing space for understanding and relationship to grow?

Prayer

O you who are beyond all things, how could we call you by any other name? What song could be sung for you? No word can express you. What Spirit can perceive you? No intelligence can comprehend you. You alone are inexpressible; all that is said has come from you. You alone are unknowable; all that is thought

has come from you. All creatures proclaim you, those who speak and those who are dumb. Every one desires you, everyone sighs and aspires after you. All that exists prays to you, and every being that can contemplate your universe raises to you a silent hymn. Have pity on us, you who are beyond all things. How could we call you by any other name? Amen.

[Attributed to Gregory of Nazianzus]

DAY 4

RENUNCIATION

Then the woman left her water jar.

(John 4:28)

Genesis 11:31-12:4 God promises to make Abram a great nation and a blessing

Psalms 23 The Lord is my shepherd

Acts 10:9-20 "What God has made clean, you must not call profane"

John 4:25-28 Then the woman left her water jar

Reflection

The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman shows that dialogue with the different, the stranger, the unfamiliar, can be life-giving. If the woman had followed the rules of her culture, she would have left when she saw Jesus approaching the well. That day, for some reason, she did not follow the established rules. Both she and Jesus broke with conventional patterns of behaviour. Through this breaking forth they showed us again that it is possible to build new relationships.

As Jesus completes the work of the Father, the Samaritan woman, for her part, leaves her water jar, meaning that she could go further in her life; she was not confined to the role society imposed on her. In John's Gospel she is the first person to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. "Breaking forth" is a necessity for those who desire to grow stronger and wiser in their faith.

That the Samaritan woman leaves behind her water jar signals that she has found a greater gift, a greater good than the water she came for, and a better place to be within her community. She recognizes the greater gift that this Jewish stranger, Jesus, is offering her.

It is difficult for us to find value, to recognize as good, or even holy, that which is unknown to us and that which belongs to another. However, recognizing the gifts that belong to the other as good and as holy is a necessary step towards the visible unity we seek.

Questions

1. If really encountering Jesus demands that we leave behind our water jars, what are those water jars for us?
2. What are the main difficulties that prevent us from doing so?
3. What new thing have you learnt from a person or experience of another denomination or another faith in recent times?
4. What spiritual insights might Muslims or Indigenous Australians have to offer Christians? Any Australians?
5. Does it matter whether or not the Samaritan woman has a name?

Prayer

Loving God, help us to learn from Jesus and the Samaritan woman that the encounter with the other opens for us new horizons of grace. Help us to break through our limits, assumptions and prejudices, to embrace new opportunities and challenges, and to enter new spaces. Help us to go beyond fear in following the call of your Son. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

DAY 5

ANNUNCIATION

You have no bucket and the well is deep.

(John 4:11)

Genesis 46:1-7	God tells Jacob not to be afraid of going down to Egypt
Psalms 133	How good it is when kindred live together in unity
Acts 2:1-11	The day of Pentecost
John 4:7-15	“You have no bucket and the well is deep”

Reflection

Jesus needed help. After a long walk, fatigue strikes. Exhausted in the heat of noon, he feels hungry and thirsty (Jn 4:6).

Furthermore, Jesus is a stranger; it is he who is in a foreign territory, and the well belongs to the woman's people. Jesus is thirsty and, as the Samaritan woman points out, he has no bucket to draw water. He needs water, he needs her help: everybody needs help!

Many Christians believe that they alone have all the answers and they need no help from anyone else. We lose a lot if we maintain this perspective. None of us can reach the depths of the well of the divine, and yet faith demands that we delve deeper into the mystery. We cannot do this in isolation. We need the help of our Christian brothers and sisters, as well as our brothers and sisters in the wider community. Only when we encounter the depths of our humanity can we reach into the depths of the mystery of God and of the Incarnation.

A common point in our faith, regardless of the church to which we belong, is that God is mystery beyond our comprehension. The search for Christian unity brings us to the recognition that no community has all the means to reach into the deep waters of the divine. We need water, we need help: everybody needs help! The more we grow in unity, share our buckets and join the pieces of our ropes, the deeper we delve into the well of the divine.

Brazilian indigenous traditions teach us to learn from the wisdom of the elderly, and at the same time, from the curiosity and innocence of infants. When we are ready to accept that we do need each other, we become like children, open to learn. And that's how God's Kingdom opens for us (Mt 18:3). We must do as Jesus did. We must take the initiative to enter into a foreign land, where we become a stranger, and cultivate the desire to learn from that which is different.

Questions

1. Do you remember situations in which your church has helped another church or has been helped by another church? What was the outcome/effect of that?
2. Are there reservations from the part of your church to accept help from another church? How can these reservations be overcome?
3. What situations have you known where the giver has received and the receiver has given?
4. How does refusing to help another diminish us? It has been said that our country's current harsh policies of turning away refugees and asylum seekers has diminished its soul. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

Prayer

God, spring of the living water, help us to understand that the more we join together the pieces of our ropes, the more deeply our buckets reach into your divine waters! Awaken us to the truth that the gifts of the other are an expression of your unfathomable mystery. And make us sit at the well together to drink from your water which gathers us in unity and peace. We ask this in the name of your son Jesus Christ, who asked the Samaritan woman to give him water for his thirst. Amen.

DAY 6

TESTIMONY

Jesus said : “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14)

Judges 4:1-9	If you go with me, I will go
Exodus 2:15-22	Moses at the well of Midian
Psalms 91 1	The song of those who take refuge in the Lord
John 4:16-21	Perfect love casts out fear
John 4:11-15	“A spring of water welling up to eternal life”

Reflection

The dialogue that begins with Jesus asking for water becomes a dialogue in which Jesus promises water. Later in this same gospel Jesus will again ask for a drink. “I thirst,” he says from the cross, and from the cross Jesus becomes the promised fountain of water which flows from his pierced side. We receive this water, this life from Jesus, in baptism, and it becomes a water, a life, that wells up within us to be given and shared with others.

Here is the witness of a Brazilian woman who has drunk from this water and in whom this water becomes a spring: Sister Romi, a nurse from Campo Grande, was a pastor in the Pentecostal tradition.

One Sunday night, all alone in a shack in Romi’s neighbourhood, a sixteen year old indigenous girl called Semei gave birth to a baby boy. She was found lying on the floor and bleeding. Sister Romi took her to the hospital. Enquiries were made – where was Semei’s family? They were found, but they did not want to know. Semei and her child had no home to go to.

Sister Romi took them into her own modest home. She did not know Semei, and prejudice towards indigenous people is great in Campo Grande. Semei continued to have health problems, but Sister Romi’s great generosity brought forth further generosity from her neighbours. Another new mother, a Catholic called Veronica, breastfed Semei’s child as she was unable to do so. Semei named her son Luke Nathaniel and in time they were able

to move away from the city to a farm, but she did not forget the kindness of Sister Romi and her neighbours.

The water that Jesus gives, the water that Sister Romi received in baptism, became in her a spring of water and an offer of life to Semei and her child. Prompted by her witness, this same baptismal water became a spring, a fountain, in the lives of Romi's neighbours. The water of baptism springing into life becomes an ecumenical witness of Christian love in action, a foretaste of the eternal life which Jesus promises.

Concrete gestures like these practiced by ordinary people are what we need in order to grow in fellowship. They give witness to the Gospel and relevance to ecumenical relations.

Questions

1. How do you interpret Jesus' words that through him we may become "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14)?
2. Where do you see Christian people being springs of living water for you and for others?
3. Which are the situations in public and national life to which the churches should speak with a single voice in order to be springs of living water?
4. How can your local church or ecumenical group get more involved in the situations identified in Q3?

Prayer

Triune God, following the example of Jesus, make us witnesses to your love. Grant us to become instruments of justice, compassion, peace and solidarity. May your Spirit move us towards concrete actions that lead to reconciliation and unity. May walls be transformed into bridges. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

DAY 7

TESTIMONY

“Give me to drink”. (*John 4:7*)

Numbers 20:1-1	The Israelites at Meribah
Psalms 119:10-20	“I will not forget your word”
Romans 15:2-7	“May God grant you to live in harmony with one another”
John 4:7-15	“Give me to drink”

Reflection

Christians should be confident that encountering and exchanging experiences with the other, even other religious traditions, can change us and help us to reach into the depths of the well.

Approaching those who are strangers to us with the desire to drink from their well, opens to us the “wonders of God” that we proclaim.

In the wilderness God’s people were without water and God sent Moses and Aaron to bring water forth from the rock. In the same way God often meets our needs through others. As we call upon the Lord in our need, like the Samaritan asking Jesus, “Sir, give me this water,” perhaps the Lord has already answered our prayers by putting into the hands of our neighbours that for which we ask. And so we need to turn also to them, and ask, “Give me to drink.”

Sometimes the answer to our need is already in the life and goodwill of the people around us. From the Guarany people of Brazil we learn that in their language there is no equivalent word for the term “religion” as separate from the rest of life. The expression usually used literally means “our good way of being” (“ñande teko katu”). This expression refers to the whole cultural system, which includes religion. Religion, therefore, is part of the Guarany cultural system, as well as their way of thinking and being (teko). It relates to all that improves and develops the community and leads to its “good way of being” (teko katu).

The Guarany people remind us that Christianity was first called “The Way” (Acts 9:2). “The Way,” or “our good way of being” is God’s way of bringing harmony to all parts of our lives.

Questions

1. What is religion and what is it for?
2. How has your understanding and experience of God been enriched by encounters with other Christians? With ‘non-religious’ people?
3. What can Christian communities learn from indigenous wisdom and other religious traditions in your region?

Prayer

God of life, who cares for all creation, and calls us to justice and peace, may our security not come from arms, but from respect. May our force not be of violence, but of love. May our wealth not be in money, but in sharing. May our path not be of ambition, but of justice. May our victory not be from vengeance, but in forgiveness. May our unity not be in the quest of power, but in vulnerable witness to do your will. Open and confident, may we defend the dignity of all creation, sharing, today and forever, the bread of solidarity, justice and peace. This we ask in the name of Jesus, your holy Son, our brother, who, as victim of our violence, even from the heights of the cross, gave forgiveness to us all.
Amen.

(Adapted from a prayer from an ecumenical conference in Brazil, calling for an end to poverty as the first step on the path to peace through justice)

DAY 8

WITNESS

Many believed because of the woman's testimony. *(John 4:39)*

Exodus 3:13-15	Moses at the Burning Bush
Psalms 30	The Lord restores us to life
Romans 10:14-17	"How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"
John 4:27-30,39-40	Many believed because of the woman's testimony

Reflection

With her heart transformed, the Samaritan woman goes out in mission. She announces to her people that she has found the Messiah. Many believed in Jesus "because of the woman's witness" (John 4:39). The force of her witness stems from the transformation of her life caused by her encounter with Jesus. Thanks to her attitude of openness, she recognized in that stranger "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14)

Mission is a key element of Christian faith. Every Christian is called to announce the name of the Lord. Pope Francis told missionaries, "wherever you may go, it would do you well to think that the Spirit of God always gets there ahead of us". Mission is not proselytism. Those who truly announce Jesus approach others in loving dialogue, open to mutual learning, and respecting difference. Our mission requires us to learn to drink from the living water without taking hold of the well. The well does not belong to us. Rather, we draw life from the well, the well of living water, which is given by Christ.

Our mission must be a work both of word and witness. We seek to live out what we proclaim. The late Brazilian Archbishop, Helder Camara, once said that many have become atheists because they have become disillusioned by people of faith who do not practice what they preach. The witness of the woman led her community to believe in Jesus because her brothers and sisters saw coherence between her words and her own transformation.

If our word and witness is authentic, the world will hear and believe. "How are they to believe if they have not heard?" (Rom 10:14).

Questions

1. When was the last time you changed your mind about something important, or made a big change in your life? What/ who influenced/helped you to do that?
2. What is mission? [Note at least 3 aspects of mission are alluded to in the commentary above] What is the relationship between unity and mission?
3. Do Christians sometimes think/ behave as though we own the well? Where does this mentality come from? How realistic is this stance in the modern world?
4. Do you know people in your community whose life story is a witness to unity?

Something to think about

Another image in the Scriptures for the Spirit of God is oil. To keep the flame of our life in grace alight we pray to be purified and strengthened by a constant supply of the Spirit of God.

Prayer

God, Spring of living water, make of us witnesses of unity through both our words and our lives. Help us to understand that we are not the owners of the well, and give us the wisdom to welcome the same grace in one another. Transform our hearts and our lives so that we might be genuine bearers of the Good News, and lead us always to the encounter with the other, as an encounter with you. We ask this in the name of your Son Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.