

30th January 2022 URC sermon Simon Redman

Bible passage read by Hugh John 7 37-40 and John 8 1-11

It's not hard to find situations today when people are oppressed by the people in power. In Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, North Korea... this situation we have just heard could play out. In fact it is easier to speak about the number of countries where a woman wouldn't be shamed and in physical danger here. But the story we have just heard reads of judgement by one group of people over another.

And even in the West we have become more judgemental than ever much of this playing out on a digital stage, with the phrase virtue signalling to express the fact that I publicly am righteous on some issue, often about gender or race.

But what virtue signalling ignores is that it comes from the head not the heart. People can press a button to like a cause or hold up a poster saying something like 'Bring back our girls' without leaving the armchair or inconveniencing themselves in terms of their time and our money.

This passage speaks of the hypocrisy of such positions and is as relevant today as it was then. You and I have seen many changes in our life times...

The mobile phone 1973

Internet 1989

In one way this has made communication easier, but in another it has people more insular, communicating via text rather than speaking and adopting false identities online and sharing views anonymously behind made up names.

The fundamental need of people, to love and be loved, and to have meaning and purpose has not changed and so this message, as with all of the teachings of Jesus is as important and relevant as ever.

The setting for the story in our first reading is the last day of the Feast of the Tabernacles and in particular the water liberation ceremony. The feast celebrates the harvest and occurs just before the rainy season and remembers all God has done for the Israelites leading them out of bondage and through the desert. It looks back at what God did for mankind but also looks forward to the time when God will intervene again in the affairs of humanity and his Shekinah glory will fill the Temple as he did for Solomon described in 2 Chronicles and it was anticipated each year on the last and greatest day of the festivals.

In John 7:37 that Hugh read it says 'On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink"'. God is saying his glory has returned in the form of Jesus.

And the water libation ceremony was the visual prayer for rain for the harvest to ripen. The High Priest would take water from the pool of Siloam, which was spring fed, and so considered living water and then return to the Temple and pour the living water over the altar.

Jesus returns the next day and we pick up the story as the teachers of the law and the Pharisees try to catch him out, again!... They ask him shall we kill this woman according to the law?

This situation is so packed with significance I want to point out some key ones....

1/ **They were in the Outer Court**, also known as the Woman's court or Gentiles Court, the Temple area that anyone could be in. Beyond this was the Holy Court that only righteous men were permitted to enter to make their sacrifices and beyond that the Holy of Holies, the sacred chamber

where the Glory of God dwelled and the High Priest could only enter once a year, tied by rope to pull him out if he was struck down. **This said that the closer we want to get to God, the more holiness is required. Jesus shows that God comes to the outer court to reach everyone!**

2/ John is very specific in mentioning this encounter took place on the next day after the last and greatest day of the feast. **The Timing** and significance to the Jewish audience is absolutely clear!

3/ **Where is the man?** It takes two to be involved in adultery and the law says the man should be judged and stoned to death too.

4/ **Jesus ignores their question**, should they stone the woman, **stoops down** and starts writing in the dust. If I asked you whether you consider Hugh should receive the death sentence for his actions and you started tapping on your phone or doodling, that would seem odd wouldn't it?

5/ **What was Jesus writing?** They continue to question him and so Jesus gives them an answer.

'Alright, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone'. (Brilliant answer!) Then he stooped down again and starts writing in the dust.

6/ What happens next? Without a further word they drop their stones and leave **the older ones first**.

What did Jesus write that caused the woman's accusers to leave?

7/In Jeremiah 17:13 we read 'Oh Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust, because they have forsaken the Lord, the spring of living water.'

Jesus is using the Remez form of hinting. At that festival time the people are asking God to give them living water, Jesus claims to be the living water they have been longing and searching for and is rejected by them so he writes their names in the dust. The significance is not lost on the teachers of the law who were well versed in the Torah and would have made the connection between the prophecy and the actions of Jesus... and we know that miracles happen when the Spirit of The Lord is present.

8/ Jesus speaks to the woman and says **he does not condemn her** for her actions but tells her not to sin further. This is the action of a loving Father trying to help his children to live a life that will be good for them, we see clearly the heart of God and a clue to how we should act too.

9/ The teachers of the law had turned God's message into an exhausting set of rules that meant that no-one could feel close to God or worthy. **God wants our hearts to have a true relationship with him.**

10/ The teachers of the law had their names written in the dust for the wrong reason and we who embrace Jesus as the son of God can have our names written in the book of Life.

So I want to build on this and share the message I think I have for your church. I went to bed on the 21st December 2021 saying To God, what can I say to a congregation of faithful followers of Christ who already know scripture intimately? I was woken up at 4.15 and went into the bathroom to type out this message that follows on my phone in one download and I believe it is for your Church but I will leave you to discern how it speaks to you.

11/ I wrote down What's in a name?

Names are important. God renamed people to show his plans for them

As so beautifully described by Alice in your Christmas reflection, Jesus means Savior, and names for Jesus can be categorised into his relationship to God (Son of God, God on earth), his relationship to us (Bridegroom, yoked to us) and what his role is (bread of life, saviour of the world).

Emmanuel means God is with us, Abram became Abraham (Father of a multitude of nations) Simon renamed Peter (the Rock) by Jesus,

Can you share names Jesus described himself by ?Good shepherd,

Here is a tip for engaging with people for the first time. Ask their name and then look it up and say, do you know what your name means? Most people will say no and are delighted to be told ... It means grace of God... good icebreaker and start of a faith conversation. I used it when I was in hospital the last two times in the Autumn. Treat yourself to a name dictionary and use it to speak to people when you are out and about

The name the world is giving people are not nice. You're too fat, too thin, you're a failure, unlovable, stupid.... We have so much to offer in conversation with people because we are in the world, but not of the world. What we offer is the promise of living water that will never run dry.

People think that their sin keeps them away from God, our passage today shows God sees through that and wants to offer love that the world doesn't offer.

And we can love others if we really know that he loves us...

12/ What is in your hands?

You may feel unqualified to share the gospel, too old, too apprehensive, scared of young people.

I want to share 3 things

a/ Young people are really scared too, probably much more than you ever were. The reason so many hang around Macdonalds at night is because it is well lit and they are scared of young people who hang around in dark places.

Remember when an Angel appeared, it would say 'Do not be afraid', Jesus said do not Fear for I am with you..that's why I asked to play that song before I spoke, if you forget this talk please just remember the scriptural words of the song!

Are you fearful? About what's going on in the world. I felt called to remind you that he has conquered the world and we need to step into what he has already done and will do so we can deal with the fear we carry.... What if that person we love rejects the Lord, what if...name that fear.. and then let's name the person who deals with that fear, mighty Counsellor, Prince of Peace, Savior of the World.

But you might be like me and have lost a little confidence over the last two years. My call today to you and to me is 'Do not be afraid' ... to pray, to speak to people, to expect miracles and transformation.

b/ The key people in youngsters' lives are the grandparents. They represent stability, time for people, good listeners, less judgemental, less emotional than the parents. The favourite street pastor is Doreen who is in her 80s.

Do you think that people who have lived through the war, the aftermath of the war, the introduction of the computer and the internet, the 80s greed, the banking crash... Have something to offer about resilience and coping with challenges? Are you willing to share it?

c) God used people who felt inadequate and ill prepared, Moses stammered, Abraham and Sarah were very old when they had children, Gideon and David just young men who became mighty warriors, Mary was a young teenager when chosen to be the mother of Jesus. I was called to tell you that there is work to do and what you called yourself this morning when you got up

The Western world is seeking to show kindness without Faith. This has translated into the Woke Agenda where we try to protect interest groups, and youngsters from the possible shock of reading Charlotte Bronte, Dickens and other classics; like the Pharisees in our bible passage today, people are often abiding by a new set of social rules which do not come from the heart.

My analogy of the Western culture is that we have taken the goalposts off the football pitch, the tram lines and the referee and the said play. As long as you think you have scored a goal that is ok. But that is not preparing youngsters for life and that has led to an outbreak of mental health where the reality does not meet the story. We know that life is a series of battles and blessings and God helps us through the battles and we need to share this wisdom without judgement and with love.

In a world obsessed with self, we need to demonstrate community, togetherness and love. Gandhi said that if he had met Christians who lived the teachings of Jesus he would have become one.

I want to pose a question. What are the core values of Christianity and how do they differ to the world? The Church needs to look different to the world, where it does not and tries to reflect the world, it will not succeed. How can URC demonstrate Jesus values in everything it does (Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and Love your neighbour as yourself.

You are well qualified!

13/ I want to ask you all; How have you started the year? What do you hope for to happen in the City in 2022 , in the lives of our families, in this nation and in the world. How big are your dreams?

There is power in the name of Jesus and I wanted to ask how are you going to respond to the great commission to make Disciples of all Nations; That could be praying in your quiet rooms with 2 or 3 others, or using this building in the heart of the City to connect with the spiritually hungry. God will take what you offer and turn it into something much bigger (like the feeding of the 5000), what is in your hand Jesus said and then said you do it (I paraphrase).

Jesus says of you, you are perfectly and wonderfully made, your name is tattooed on his hand, he knew about us before we were knit in our mother's womb, we were not an accident. The world needs to hear this positive message.

14/ How would you explain what you believe to a stranger? It's worth thinking about that question a lot. The world has searched for alternative answers to the question of why we exist or what can make us happy. None of them satisfy, we need more of them to get the same satisfaction, money, power, drugs and then we meet that hole. Don't try to change the world on your own, but step into what God is already doing. He is roaming the earth searching for hearts that are turned to him and he wants to partner with us!

There is an increasing interest in Cathedrals and monastic orders as they offer a quiet space in a world that is always noisy. People are filling the silence with noise because they feel uncomfortable when it is quiet. (The enemy's tactics is to keep people busy, life noisy and to stop people meeting in true community (Covid).

Jesus wants us to live in unity, the enemy wants to keep us apart, separated by covid, not talking but texting, not listening to discourse but separating into Tribes, you are either for or against something, Brexit, Vax vs Antivax, Gender...

This country is built on Christian principles and we need to teach these again. How to disagree well , to take back the territory

15/ **What did you tell yourself when you looked in the mirror this morning?** Do you believe that God can use you? ... That your hands are trained for war (with the powers of darkness?)

He has overcome the world, do we believe that? I felt called to challenge you to answer that question?

How do we use what is in our hands to spread the good news to a hurting world that is desperate to hear it. What skills do you have , experience, time, love and belief in prayer, hope, understanding of the the life to come, of the scriptures and willingness to share them.

In Mark 75 Jesus asks the man who was lame for 38 years 'What do you want'. He asks the same of blind men. He wants to see that the person is looking to be cleansed before they are healed.

16/ Love people you may not like, don't judge, have time for people

17/ **Most important point of all Remember the power of a praying church.**

No one should expect a harvest without praying first calling on the HS to come amongst us and transform what we see

The Disciples in the Upper room were scared and had no strategies for transforming the nation, they did not wait sleeping in their beds. They were told to wait on the HS and then it happened and they were obedient to what God was doing.

Jesus went into the desert and came out in power. **Have we made the possibilities of the Holy Spirit governed by our imagination or experience rather than the possibilities?** Do we believe that we can tell this mountain to go from here to here if we believe?

Birmingham Alabama renamed to City of Hope- God spoke to all the pastors who prayed together and marched through the main street declaring the sovereignty of God over the City. The filthy water became clean and was sold as drinking water, berries came back on the bushes and then wild bear and deer returned, the physical cleansing of the land was a sign of God's presence in that place.

Hebridean revival Two old ladies , one blind, did what they could, pray

In the retreat of Ffald-y-Brenin in North Wales near where the Welsh revival of 1904 started, there are many miracles. On one occasion a man visited and was shown around by Roy Godwin who was rather troubled by the foul language and lewd jokes that the man was telling as he was shown around. When they got to the chapel the man fell face down on the floor and said Oh I have led such a bad life! The Holy Spirit had convicted him without anyone saying a word. In that same chapel a woman was healed of her blindness during a prayer meeting without anyone praying for her. We need to invite the Holy Spirit into our Church, our City and follow in the slipstream.

The origin of all of these started with a group of faithful people praying and fasting and crying out to the Lord for his presence to come.

Remember what you have seen him do already, have you seen answers to prayer, share these stories in your discussion groups to raise the Faith Expectation? He will do great things Allelujah. I felt I was to remind you of what you already know

I recommend a book on how revivals occur and why they can stop called Transformed by Alistair Petrie

18/ The prophecies in the 2 years before Covid were 'Wake up Church'. In his last few hours before capture, Jesus was frustrated that his closest friends could not stay awake at the crucial hour. When I got out of bed in the night to write this down, I wanted to sleep too and yet I knew that this was important. God didn't cause Covid, but it was a time to rebuild walls, our relationship with our heavenly Father, so like Jesus coming out of the desert, we are prepared to minister to our communities.

God wants to return you to your first love, to rekindle the passion that led you on a journey with Jesus. The bookshop is full of books on self help but none on helping others and he is calling you to be a House of Prayer in the City and a loving answer to the questions people are asking.

I would like to finish with a poem by David Whyte

Loaves and Fishes

This is not the age of information.

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Forget the news,
and the radio,
and the blurred screen.

This is the time
of loaves
and fishes.

People are hungry,
and one good word is bread
for a thousand.