



Flourishing as God's Church: transforming our ministry as God's people

Call to worship

'If any of you are in trouble, let them pray. If any of you are flourishing, let them sing praises to God'
(James 5:13, JBPhillips version adapted)

Hymn (*StF 73*)

Fill thou my life, O Lord my God,
In every part with praise,
That my whole being may proclaim
Thy being and thy ways.

Not for the lip of praise alone
Nor e'en the praising heart
I ask, but for a life made up
Of praise in every part:

Praise in the common things of life,
Its goings out and in;
Praise in each duty and each deed,
However small and mean.

Prayer of praise and confession

God of all creation,
you have created us all.
As individuals and community,
we are made in your image
and formed as one body.

Feed us, form us and furnish us
so that we may understand who you are
and who you would have us be.

God of invitation,
you call us, you care for us,

Fill every part of me with praise;
Let all my being speak
Of thee and of thy love, O Lord,
Poor though I be and weak.

So shalt thou, gracious Lord, from me
Receive the glory due;
And so shall I begin on earth
The song for ever new.

So shall no part of day or night
From sacredness be free;
But all my life, in every step,
Be fellowship with thee.

you equip us with gifts to serve each other
while serving you.

Forgive us when we forget that we are yours;
when we do not listen when you speak,
when we fail to accept your invitation to serve.

Open our ears
to hear the sound of your voice,
and our hearts
to respond to your presence and grace.
Amen.

Epistle – *Romans 12: 1-8*

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. ²Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

³For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.

⁴For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Reflection

I remember hearing the story told of a minister serving in a market town many years ago. If there was a church appointment that needed filling, the minister – who was a tall, imposing figure – would walk down the

high street and, on seeing the person he had in mind to fill that particular role, would place a hand upon their shoulder and declare 'My friend, the Lord has a job for you to do.' There was no way out after that!

Maybe I should give it a try? Instead of the high street, I could seek out church members in the aisles of Morrisons! Or maybe not. I could give a long list of reasons why it wouldn't work. Apart from anything else, it's not a sign of a healthy church if no-one ever offers to do a job unless the minister asks them directly.

Here's another (more recent) story told by Viv Pitts: A 15-year-old girl was a brilliant door steward, giving people a warm welcome on arrival, with a lovely smile. I commented to her and to her mother, that she was especially gifted for this and when looking at career options it ought to be counted as one of her strengths. On leaving school she gained employment as a receptionist and enjoyed working in that role for a number of years.

I'm sure we could all agree that this is much better place to start: appreciating someone's gift and encouraging them to put it to good use whether in church or beyond.

In Romans 12 and elsewhere, St Paul teaches us that, as God's people, we are one body and each of us has particular gifts: 'So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.'

If we are to flourish as the people of God, we must delight in the gifts of every member and look for every opportunity to put those gifts (including our own!) to good use.

Hymn (StF 566)

Take my life, and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to thee;
take my moments and my days,
let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my silver and my gold,
not a mite would I withhold;
take my intellect, and use
every power as thou shalt choose.

Take my hands, and let them move
at the impulse of thy love;
take my feet, and let them be
swift and beautiful for thee.

Take my will, and make it thine;
it shall be no longer mine;
take my heart – it is thine own;
it shall be thy royal throne.

Take my voice, and let me sing
always, only, for my King;
take my lips, and let them be
filled with messages from thee.

Take my love; my Lord, I pour
at thy feet its treasure-store;
take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for thee.

Gospel - John 4: 4-15, 27-30

⁴ Now Jesus had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Will you give me a drink?' ⁸ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, 'You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?' (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

¹⁰ Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.'

¹¹ 'Sir,' the woman said, 'you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?' ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?'

¹³ Jesus answered, 'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'

¹⁵ The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.'

[Part of the story is omitted here – to make it a more suitable length to read in church – but by all means read the complete story at home]

²⁷ Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, 'What do you want?' or 'Why are you talking with her?'

²⁸ Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ²⁹ 'Come, see a man who told me everything I've ever done. Could this be the Messiah?' ³⁰ They came out of the town and made their way towards him.

Reflection

In my first reflection I explored the familiar (and comforting?) idea that each of us has different gifts and we must put them to good use for the sake of the whole people of God. But there is a problem (as we all know) that in many churches there's a long list of jobs that need doing and we struggle to find the people able and willing to do them.

We have to account for church money, maintain our buildings, prepare for worship, provide pastoral care, safeguard children, etc, etc. It's all very well for each of us to decide what gifts we're able to put to use within the life of the church but what if that still leave big gaps? How can our churches truly flourish if we don't have new people coming forward with their gifts?

I want to suggest that the Samaritan woman offers us a model of transformation. This well-known and much-loved Gospel story begins with the woman shocked to discover Jesus at the well at noon asking her for a drink. He is a Jew, she is a Samaritan. He is a man, she is a woman. He is a rabbi, she is someone shunned by her community. This encounter shouldn't be happening at all!

The woman starts out – as all of us do – from the safety of her point of view and her presuppositions: How can you ask me for a drink? How can you give me living water when you have no bucket? Are you greater than Jacob who gave us this well?

And yet she is brave enough to enter fully into conversation with this stranger and the encounter transforms her. To begin with her gift is knowing the time to come to the well when no-one else will be there. By the end she is leaving her bucket behind and going to tell everyone in her community that they must come and see Jesus – and they do come! Her self-understanding of her gifts has been totally transformed. Are we brave enough to open ourselves to that kind of transformation?

Please don't misunderstand what I'm saying: We must be realistic about what we can and cannot do ('think of yourself with sober judgement', as St Paul puts it). We may have regrets about what we can no longer do. No-one should feel guilty about things we simply can't do.

But the Samaritan woman has important message for us: Don't be too quick to put limits on what is possible. We must be open to entirely new possibilities. God could be leading us into new ways of being church in which gifts we didn't even know we had are just what's needed.

The Samaritan woman's transformation echoes the words of St Paul: 'Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed'.

Our next hymn speaks to this situation. In v.4 a word of confession: 'Lord, we set our human limits on the work we do'. In v.3 a word of challenge: 'Seeing life from your perspective makes your challenge plain'.

Dare we see our churches from God's perspective? Are there things that need to change and gifts that must be put to use? It's no easy task but being open to God and using the gifts he has given us is the Gospel way.

The Samaritan woman had that transforming conversation by Jacob's Well. You can speak with Jesus today and prepare to be amazed at where it might take you!

Hymn (StF 664)

Lord, you call us to your service,
each in our own way.
Some to caring, loving, healing;
some to preach, or pray;
some to work with quiet learning,
truth discerning,
day by day.

Life for us is always changing
in the work we share.
Christian love adds new dimensions
to the way we care.
For we know what you could lead us,
as you need us,
anywhere.

Seeing life from your perspective
makes your challenge plain,
as your heart is grieving over
those who live in pain.
Teach us how, by our compassion,
you may fashion
hope again.

Lord, we set our human limits
on the work we do.
Send us your directing Spirit,
pour your power through,
that we may be free in living
and in giving
all for you.

Prayers of thanksgiving & intercession & the Lord's Prayer

Loving God,
you call each of us to ministry,
giving to each congregation
a variety and richness
which we often take for granted.

Accept our thanks
for each person present here today.

Accept our thanks
for the gifts they bring
to the whole body of the church,
creating enrichment and health.

Accept our thanks
for the faithfulness of countless people
who have continued in worship and service,
even when they have been hurt by the church
or were angry with life.

Accept our thanks
that they put loyalty to you above all else.

Accept our thanks also, Lord,
for those who have been the Church's disturbers:

defending the marginalized;
stopping us from being inward-looking;
searching for the truth ardently but lovingly.

Accept our thanks
for those who have not held back
when asked to serve:
those who have been loyal to a task;
those who have given long commitment
of time and energy.

Accept our thanks
for all who have offered gifts of leadership:
ordained and lay,
stewards and pastoral workers,
youth leaders and musicians.

But, Lord, our greatest thanks
is for all faithful Christians
who have been clothed in joy,
wrapped in humility,
shining examples of the way Jesus
spoke, healed, taught and served,
for these are the saints of today;
a wonderful gift from you to the world.

Spend some time bringing your concerns to God for the church, your local community and the wider world.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Hymn (StF 611)

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you
in the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping;
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow
till we've seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

Sending out prayer

Lord, send us your directing Spirit and pour your power through each one of us. **Amen**

*Service prepared by Roger Smith, drawing on material from Singing the Faith, CCLI 1098151, the URC Prayer Handbook 2020 and the Wharfedale and Aireborough Circuit Flourish programme 2022.
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