



### Opening Prayer for Lent (Cranmer's *Collect for Purity*)

Almighty God,  
to whom all hearts are open, all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden;  
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts,  
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly love you,  
and worthily magnify your holy name;  
through Christ our Lord. **Amen**

### 'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

What comes to mind when you hear the term 'witness', and what do you understand it as meaning in a faith context?

### Psalm of the Week – Psalm 95

O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise  
to the rock of our salvation!  
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;  
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!  
**For the Lord is a great God,  
and a great King above all gods.  
In his hand are the depths of the earth;  
the heights of the mountains are his also.  
The sea is his, for he made it,**

**and the dry land, which his hands have formed.**

O come, let us worship and bow down,  
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!

**For he is our God,  
and we are the people of his pasture,  
and the sheep of his hand.**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;  
**as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.  
Amen**

### Prayers of Renewal

Jesus told his disciples that if they wanted to follow him,  
they needed to deny themselves, and take up their crosses.  
God calls us into that same movement  
of dying to sin and rising again with Christ.  
In this quiet space for reflection,  
let us bring to God those things in need of renewal:

*Silence is kept for a few moments...*

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**have mercy upon us.**

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**have mercy upon us.**

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**grant us peace.**

God of our journeys and false starts and new beginnings,  
you walk with us all of our days,  
and nothing in life or death or all creation  
can separate us from your love in Jesus Christ.  
Thank you that you forgive us our faults and mistakes,

share with us in our worries and struggles,  
and lead us onwards into fullness of life.

We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus. **Amen**

**Reading** John 4:5 – 42

### **Sermon**

One of the best series I've seen in recent years was called *The Trial of Christine Keeler*, and was shown on BBC One on Sunday nights, a few years ago. It tells the story of what has become known as the Profumo affair, and for the first time it does so from the point of view of the woman at its heart. John Profumo was Secretary of State for War, when he had an affair with the nineteen-year-old Keeler, who'd also slept with a Russian attaché called Yevgeny Ivanov. When this began to come out, Profumo publicly denied their affair in the House of Commons, using parliamentary privilege. However, when he was found out, he resigned and withdrew from public life. The fall guy in this episode was Stephen Ward, an osteopath who introduced men in positions of power to young women, including Profumo to Keeler. Pressure was applied by Police to various people in order to support trumped up charges of 'living off immoral earnings'. Yet, whilst Ward almost certainly wasn't making any money from these introductions, his own defence barrister had acknowledged that he was grooming the women he took under his wing, using them to forge connections amongst the establishment. He died before sentence was passed.

One of the saddest things which this series brought to light was the way in which Keeler was used and abused by so many people, from her mother and stepfather to the powerful men she slept with, Ward, journalists, her manager, and even the Police. Having come from a very different background to the world she found herself thrown into, she was exploited by others pursuing their own agendas. Yet, it was only in her last years that she was able to accept the barrister's view

of what had been going on with Ward, as she didn't want to be seen as a victim. My impression of Keeler is that while she was out of her depth, in the scenario she found herself in, she was a very damaged young woman who deserved way better from those around her, and I think it's not surprising she sometimes hit the self-destruct button.

Now, you might be wondering why I have spent the last few minutes outlining the story of Christine Keeler! Well, it came into my mind as I was looking through commentaries in preparation for today. Some of the commentaries I looked at, notably those written by men, seem to struggle to get past that part of the Samaritan woman's exchange with Jesus where he says she has five previous husbands, and lives with another bloke at the moment. Yet, as one of the more insightful reflections on this text recognises, Jesus doesn't sound any note of judgment, and doesn't insist she change her life. Any preoccupation with such demands says far more about the reader than the Gospel writer! I wonder if, like Keeler, this unnamed woman who met Jesus in the full light of day, indeed in the blistering heat of the midday sun by Jacob's well, was used and abused time and again in the run-up to that day. Feminist perspectives on this reading seem to think so, and it could explain her complicated relationship history.

As usual, historical context matters when we explore the Scriptures. We need to keep in mind that the norms surrounding marriage were different in first-century Palestine than in twenty-first-century Britain. For starters, betrothal was legally binding in a way that engagement isn't today, and having sex was the point at which married life began for most ordinary people (as was the case in England, until the mid-1700s, for couples without any property to inherit). This means that, if she was passed around between different blokes, this would have resulted in having accumulated a collection of husbands in the eyes of the law of the time. She wasn't, as one commentator put it, simply 'unlucky in love'. Instead, if this reading is correct, she was probably somebody who, like Keeler, had a complex and damaged past, that

left her far more vulnerable to being exploited by others in the future. Certainly, she wouldn't have been drawing water in the intense heat of the midday sun – rather than during the comparative cool of early morning – if she was regarded by her peers as respectable.

This begs the key question: why has her story been misunderstood, by many commentators, for generations? We can gain some insight into what is going on by turning back to Keeler's story for a moment. When *The Trial of Christine Keeler* was being broadcast, on Sunday evenings, I remember overhearing a conversation in the Coffee Bar at NMMC in which Profumo was praised for undertaking many years of charity work, when he was forced to withdraw from public life, but Keeler was given quite a hard time. It's not surprising; for years, she was vilified, unable to shake off the legacy of what happened to her. On the other hand, Profumo was redeemed in many people's minds despite being a serial adulterer (Keeler was far from the only woman with whom he cheated on his wife). Indeed, the truth is that Profumo was at least as promiscuous as Christine Keeler, if not more so.

It is neatly summed up by a scene in the final episode in which John and Valerie Profumo have a major row about his behaviour towards women, and he tells her, "I only did what all of my friends were doing – I just got caught!". Powerful men expected to treat women as they wanted and get away with it all, while at the same time, women were held to much higher moral standards, and judged harshly if they fell short of them. This isn't an accident. Patriarchy is present within the Bible's attitude to women, despite the very first thing we learn about humanity being that women and men are equally made in the image of God. Patriarchy was present in the 1950s and early 1960s, when Profumo and friends exploited others and expected to get away with treating their marriage vows as just incidental. Patriarchy is present today, in a world in which women are used, abused, and discarded. I wonder, then, how much do patriarchal systems influence how we read the text of the unnamed Samaritan woman at the well?

Perhaps, unlike Nicodemus, she isn't named here as she didn't end up being part of the early Church. Yet, unlike him, she doesn't creep around and approach Jesus under the cover of darkness. Unlike the Pharisee, the religious insider, she moves past taking Jesus' words literally, and hears the name of God – 'I AM' (John 4:26). And, unlike the powerful man, she makes herself vulnerable, by daring to speak about the grace she found in this exchange with Jesus, and to invite others to see for themselves. Being really seen, and properly heard, when the hand that life dealt her pushed her out toward the margins and made her invisible, was life-changing for this intelligent woman, who was willing to move beyond her religious certainties.

If we can keep ourselves from passing judgment upon her, we might learn much from this woman. She shows us what can happen if we are brave enough to ask questions, and to change and to grow. The disciples were appalled that Jesus crossed religious boundaries, to take her seriously and enable her to drink the living waters he came to bring, which would satisfy her deepest thirsts for belonging, hope, and being treated with dignity. However, although she took the huge risk of spreading the word about Jesus, the passage concludes with those she led to him discarding her – we don't need you, we've seen him for ourselves. Christine Keeler was exploited by a whole variety of people, then dispensed with once no longer seen as 'useful'. How many people, of all genders and backgrounds, are exploited for the gain of others today? Can we really turn a blind eye to discrimination and xenophobia against those the government calls 'unskilled', who keep our social care system, and other vital services, going? What's the logic behind ignoring the plight of refugees being used by nation states as political pawns? Can we ignore violence and hate inflicted on others because of their gender, or not fitting into gender norms?

The bottom line is that Jesus is for the outsiders – like the Samaritan woman at the well. Are we? Amen

## Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Ignatian prayer invites us to imagine ourselves into a biblical scene, and watch as the action unfolds. Read today's passage, and picture yourself within the scene as it unfolds. What and who do you notice? What happens to you?

## Prayers of Intercession

God of costly and self-giving love,  
as we journey onwards towards the cross of Christ  
and seek transformation for ourselves, and for your world,  
we bring our prayers for others to you.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those living in places blighted by war and conflict  
and all those forced to leave everything behind to find refuge.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those impacted right now by climate change,  
and all working to support communities at the sharp end.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are unwell in body, mind or spirit,  
and all struggling to make ends meet in these tough times.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who're excited about the coming of Spring,  
and those who are anxious about what lies ahead.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who witness in the name of Christ,  
and especially people and organisations close to our hearts.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who are worried about jobs or business,  
and all who are bereaved or suffering other forms of loss.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,  
and in the presence of the Holy Spirit,  
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...

## Lord's Prayer

## Final Prayer – Collect for the Third Sunday of Lent

Almighty God,  
whose most dear Son went not up to joy  
but first he suffered pain,  
and entered not into glory before he was crucified:  
mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross,  
may find it none other than the way of life and peace;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

## Blessing

As you journey onwards in God's love,  
towards the foot of the cross of Christ,  
may you step forward boldly and act justly,  
so that through you, all may know that they matter.  
And the blessing of God,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,  
be upon you, and all whom you love and pray for,  
now and for ever. **Amen**