

This week's prayers are adapted from Ray Simpson, *Celtic Worship Through The Year*, pp 39-41. They come from an evening service, hence the adaptation.

Call to worship and opening prayers

The light of Christ has come into the world.

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Light of the world, in grace and beauty,

Mirror of God's eternal face,

Transparent flame of love's free duty,

You bring salvation to our race.

We offer to you, Lord, the troubles of this week;

We lay down our burdens at your feet.

Forgive us our sins, give us your peace,

And help us to receive your Word.

In the name of Christ. Amen.

Explain context of reading

[Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-67](#)

The other week I mentioned my grandmother's friendship with the famous missionary Gladys Aylward. Another friend of mine called Chris was a doctor, and his father had also been a doctor. Chris' father met Gladys Aylward on one or two occasions.

One was a time when she had returned to England by boat, had disembarked at Southampton, but was ill and was taken to hospital. It was the hospital where Chris' father worked.

He met her on the ward, and she discovered he was a Christian. During their conversation he asked about her singleness. Had there never been a man in her life? I should explain that the romance in the film of her life, *The Inn Of The Sixth Happiness*, was a Hollywood fiction which annoyed her no end.

Yes, she said, there had been a man once. But he hadn't known that he was meant for her.

Perhaps that sense she had of there being one particular person who is the right one to marry fits with the story of Abraham's servant finding the young woman of God's choice to marry Isaac. Sure enough, God guides the servant to

the beautiful Rebekah. Now in my opinion, all young women called Rebekah are beautiful, so this is not surprising.

But popular Christianity has extrapolated from that this idea I mentioned, that God has one special person for each of us, and we have to find that person. I think there are times where that might be the case – an appropriate woman is needed as God begins expanding Abraham’s descendants to a second generation, and somebody like Gladys Aylward with her calling and her feisty character would have needed an exceptional man. However, most of what Holy Scripture teaches us about marital relationships assumes no such thing. Rather, the Bible portrays principles and parameters for good relating. Indeed, you could say the emphasis is not so much *looking* for the right person as on *being* the right person yourself.

And even though the story of Rebekah meeting Isaac comes from a vastly different culture over three thousand years ago, where men were called ‘master’ and marriages were arranged, I still believe I can offer a few reflections from the narrative about being the right person. It may be that you have been married for many years, in which case consider this like a brief MOT of your relationship. It may be that you are no longer married due to widowhood or divorce, in which case I hope this will help you rebuild for the future. You may still be looking for someone: if so, I pray this may point you in a helpful direction. Or you may sense you are never going to marry, and if that is the case I still believe that the themes here will enrich you in all your relationships, whether or not they are romantic ones.

The **first** of three themes I want to draw out is that of *servicing*.

We may find it strange that Abraham’s servant asks for a particular sign to show him who the right girl is, and of course this could become just like spiritual Bingo. But consider the sign he asks for: that she would not only draw water from the well for him, but also for his camels (verse 44). He asked to be led to a young woman who had an attitude of service.

In marriage, this is not just something for the wife. Both parties need to have a heart of service. Too many people go into a relationship with the desire to get something out of the other person, be that sexual pleasure, money, or something else. But love gives.

The apostle Paul had this in mind when he instructed wives to submit to their husbands and husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church – that is, be willing to die for your wife!

It's something that Jesus models for us in all our relationships, when he said that he came not to be served but to serve. Paul echoed that when he said that Jesus came, taking the form of a servant, and became obedient, even to death – death on a cross. By giving and serving, Jesus brought about the salvation of the world.

If we are concerned to evaluate the health of our relationships, then the typical approach that asks, 'What am I getting out of this?' may well be the wrong question. Generally, it is better to ask, 'What are we both giving to this relationship?'

The **second** theme is that of *loving*.

We are told at the end of the reading that 'Isaac ... married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her' (verse 67).

But what kind of love does Isaac display here? We don't have a lot of evidence, but when they first meet each other it isn't about him noticing her stunning appearance and thinking, 'Wow, my dad's servant has brought back one of the Love Island contestants for me!' because we read that Rebekah covered herself with her veil when she first encountered him (verse 65).

Soon Isaac would discover how beautiful Rebekah was, but the statement 'he loved her' is more of a decision to love, rather than passion, emotion, or hormones. They all have their place to play, but they cannot be depended on to build a strong marriage. Love is not simply a feeling, it is an action.

I may have mentioned this before, but I am fond of pointing out to couples I am preparing for marriage that neither the bride nor the groom says 'I do' in our wedding service. Only one person gets to say 'I do', and it's the father of the bride, or whoever is presenting her to the groom.

No: the couple both say, 'With God's help I will'. And 'I will' is important. Occasions will come when to love someone will be an act of will. We may have to love through gritted teeth.

More positively, 'I will' is also a promise. But sometimes it's a promise that is hard to keep. So we say, 'With God's help I will.'

Do any of us need to make a decision or a promise to love? Feelings will lead us a merry dance, up and down, forwards and backwards. Let's remember that love isn't just something that happens to us: love is an active verb.

The **third** and final theme is that of *comforting*.

Right at the end of the account we read that 'Isaac was comforted after his mother's death' (verse 67) and we are clearly meant to understand that the comfort came from his marriage to Rebekah.

Marriages are for the bad times as well as the good: for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, and so on. It's great to celebrate all the joy on a wedding day, but it's worth a couple asking whether their relationship has the depth in it that means they will hold onto each other in a crisis or a tragedy. When one is suffering, will the other be a comfort and a support?

That has certainly been my experience, and when both my parents died it was good to know that Debbie was alongside me.

But it's also worth observing that our marriages don't thrive or falter in isolation. Yes, a marriage is an exclusive relationship, but it is not a private one. It takes place in society. It's one thing to talk about one spouse comforting the other, but what happens when tragedy hits the couple? That may be a time when the wider circle of family, friends, and neighbours offer the comfort and support. If both husband and wife are hurting, they may not be able to comfort each other.

It's no accident that in the Methodist marriage service it isn't only the bride and groom who make vows. The assembled family members and friends also make a promise to do all they can to support the couple in their marriage. They too say, 'With God's help we will.'

To whom might we need to offer comfort at present?

In **conclusion**, Isaac and Rebekah give us a lot to think about, but they weren't perfect. Later, we read that Isaac favoured their son Esau and Rebekah favoured their son Jacob. What catastrophic attitudes.

But even in their fallibility, they give us a tremendously good foundation for a healthy marriage between two frail sinners. Do we serve? Do we love? Do we comfort?

Intercessions

Into your hands, O Lord, we place our families, our neighbours, our brothers and sisters in Christ, and all whom we have met this week ... enfold them in your will.

Into your hands, O Lord, we place all who are victims of prejudice, oppression or neglect; the frail, the unwanted ... May everyone be cherished from conception to the grave.

Into your hands, O Lord, we place all who are restless, sick, or prey to the powers of evil ... keep guard over them.

Into your hands, O Lord, we place the concerns of this day ... *(including the theme of our service)*

Risen Christ -

May this day bring refreshment to the earth ... traders ... communities ...

May unity grow in the Body of Christ.

May our churches bring honour to you in their worship, and faith and healing to the people ...

Bring renewal to the ordained ministry ... to religious communities ... and raise up new vocations, new communities, which meet the need of our times.

The Lord's Prayer

Benediction

Lord Jesus Christ, Light of the world,

By your Cross you have overcome all darkness that oppresses.

Come and shine on us here [in ...]

that we may grow and live together in your love

which makes us one with all humanity.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore. Amen.