



# Christian Aid Week 2024

## Church Talk

I hope you enjoyed watching Aline's story – it's incredible isn't it?

Good morning! I'm \_\_\_\_\_ and I'm part of the Christian Aid Ireland team. It is such a pleasure to be **here** to worship God together this morning. I am so grateful for the opportunity to share with you about the work of Christian Aid and to thank you for your ongoing support during Christian Aid Week and beyond.

At Christian Aid, we often have the opportunity to share women's stories from some of the poorest communities around the world, in which women's voices often carry little value and often go unheard.

One of Christian Aid's values is equality. And one of the ways that we can demonstrate this by standing alongside women who are using their voice, skills and influence to make a difference. Be that through community cooperatives, through calling for change in public policy or through these incredible films that we love to share with our supporters and beyond.

Aline's voice went unheard, for what will have felt to her like the longest time. She was isolated, uneducated, married young, discarded and degraded – so hers was a voice that many people chose to ignore. But our partners in Burundi didn't, thanks to the



Christian values that Christian Aid espouses – dignity, equality, love, justice and integrity.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus' ministry models to us the importance of listening to the voice of women and men who have found themselves on the margins of their communities. Because in that listening, and in that time taken to minister into their circumstances, entire communities can, have and will continue to be changed forever.

One such example, can be found in chapter 4 of John's gospel. The account of this meeting is titled, 'Jesus Talks with a Samaritan Woman'. It doesn't exactly read like the kind of clickbait titles we're so used to reading online: "You'll never believe what happened when Daniel met a lion!" or "5 Things Herod doesn't want you to know about Bethlehem".

The shock of this heading is lost on us because we don't live in the context in which it was written. If we've been around church long enough, we know that Samaritans and Jews didn't get on, so placing Jesus with a Samaritan might seem a little controversial. But for John's original audience, this heading would likely have shaken them to their core! Never-mind the fact that John is at pains to accurately record the conversation that went on between Jesus and the woman – so that 2,000 years later, we have a vivid record of the voice of a marginalised woman who we would never have known had it not been for Jesus' intervention in her life.

Context is key when it comes to reading John 4, just as it is for understanding Aline's story – so let's dive into both together.

Jesus is on his way back to Galilee from Judea, and the route he and his disciples have chosen takes them through Sychar, a town in Samaria. John tells us that Jesus is tired from the journey and because it's now the hottest part of the day, they decide to get some food and rest. The well is a good spot for this because it gives them somewhere to sit, and shade as well, as the water spilled around the well over the centuries has encouraged plants, bushes and trees to grow around it.

And so, it's mid-day when Jesus meets the woman at the well – absolutely the wrong time of the day to be drawing water for a number of reasons if we understand her context. Firstly, it's the women's role to draw water at dawn for her entire family. The rest of the day is spent around the home, seeing to domestic matters. This is the only time of the day when a woman would be guaranteed some female company, a bit of a catch up and a chat. Our Samaritan didn't go then. Why?

Secondly, that water is used at the beginning of every day by women to make the flatbread that will feed her family. It's a staple for breakfast and dinner. Our Samaritan woman has missed the opportunity to make breakfast. Why?



Thirdly, drawing water from a 30m deep well is hard physical labour. It requires help from others – it can't be undertaken alone easily. It's a communal activity, not a singular one. And one that should be done in the cool of the morning, not the blistering heat of midday. Our Samaritan is completing this task alone, under physically painful conditions. Why?

Context is key to answering these questions, because John knows that his readers will understand, with a word, that something isn't right here. We, on the other hand, must look a little harder.

In verse 16, Jesus asks the Samaritan woman to 'go call your husband and come back.' She replies that she has no husband and Jesus adds, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

Five husbands? It's hard not to read this with a modern perspective. Which celebrity springs to mind? Kim Kardashian? Elizabeth Taylor? Either way, we imagine a woman with autonomy, with the power to pick and choose her husbands – casting them aside when they no longer match her lifestyle.

But this is not the case for our Samaritan woman. She has no autonomy. She lives in a deeply patriarchal society that perceives a 12-year-old girl to be of marriageable age and allows divorce for 'any matter' without the need to prove anything in court. In this culture, women needed men to be safe and provided for because they didn't carry any innate value outside of their roles as a wife and a mother.

No woman at that time would have chosen to bounce between marriage partners. This history that Jesus reveals must really be a tragic one. She has been abandoned – either intentionally through divorce, or unintentionally through being widowed. And with every dissolution of each relationship, her value has lessened and lessened until now, the man who she is with won't even marry her.

So, let's go back to those questions about why she was at the well, drawing water at noon.

Can you imagine what the women of her village must have thought of her and how they must have spoken about her? She was a living reminder of how precarious their own existence was. Each could easily be divorced by their own husband. How many steps away from being just like her were any of them? As the embodiment of their greatest fears, she was rejected by the only community she had access to.

The blistering heat of the midday sun would seem like nothing compared to the agony of the life that this woman has led up to the day when she arrives at the well to find a Jewish stranger asking for a drink.



Aline experienced this same isolation from her community. Forced to leave school, married at 13, and giving birth to her first child at 14, Aline's life had always been controlled by men who didn't have her best interests at heart. Then, after years and years of domestic violence, her husband married another woman and threw Aline out of their home. In a final act of cruelty, he prevented her from seeing her children and justified this to their community by claiming that Aline was mentally unstable.

In Burundi, the social stigma around mental health is high, especially in rural areas where education is limited and health-care unaffordable. Aline's husband's calculated decision to claim that she was mentally ill was intended to destroy her reputation – and, for a time, he succeeded. Aline was left homeless and alone. In her own words: 'I wandered the streets, asking anyone for a place to sleep. Those who showed me kindness would let me stay for two or three days, but it was difficult. People would insult me and treat me with contempt. They forgot I was a human being. It filled me with sorrow.'

As with the Samaritan woman, Aline's reputation had been destroyed. But, as we know, that Jesus is not influenced by how the world views us – he is only influenced by his Father's love for us. And as we see throughout the Old and New Testament, God is filled with love and compassion for the marginalised, the poor, the oppressed, the lonely and the lost.

When we read about Jesus' interactions with the people he meets during his ministry on Earth, we see that he looks to the heart of each person and knows the potential their lives could hold. He understands that often their reputation existed because of something outside of their control and it prevents them from living a fully-formed life.

Just as he does with so many other marginalised, culturally voiceless people, Jesus comes alongside the woman at the well and speaks with her – irrespective of whether it is culturally acceptable or not. And the disciples' reactions on their return would suggest it very much was not.

As she speaks with Jesus, the woman reveals a surprisingly well-formed understanding of scripture concerning matters of worship and a coming saviour. The next surprise, is Jesus' decision to declare that he *is* that saviour that she and the Samaritans, have been waiting for. As a result, she becomes the first person to have this confirmation spoken to them in John's gospel – even before Jesus confirms his identity to his own disciples!

Jesus proves his identity by telling the woman that he knows the details of her life up to this point but not in order to shame her. That she readily accepts Jesus' offer of living water and rushes towards the town instead of away from it (probably for the first time in her life), shows us the deep desire she has to leave behind her old life and begin living a new one in and through Christ.



On paper, Aline probably looked like a highly unlikely candidate for the training programme our partners in Burundi run in Makamba province. Homeless, lacking education and mentally ill (according to the community). Yet our partners, in following Jesus' example, weren't swayed or influenced by Aline's perceived reputation, instead they looked to Aline herself and saw a woman desperate to change her circumstances and determined to get her children back. A woman with an unshakeable faith in God.

And so, Aline was invited to attend a three day training programme. She describes the impact of the experience as this: 'I took a three-day training course with very skilled trainers. I came out with amazing knowledge and skills. The teacher restored a sense of hope and energy in me.'

Aline learnt how to form a Village Savings and Loans Association and establish a steady income. With a small start-up loan, Aline started trading avocados and peanuts locally, and with her profits, she bought a bicycle so she could transport greater quantities of goods to markets further away from her home. Through hard work and dedication, Aline was able to pay back her loan and start building saving of her own. Thanks to this, she has since been able to build her own home and been reunited with her three eldest children. But this isn't the end of Aline's story.

And neither was the journey back into her town, the end of the Samaritan woman's story. She is so convinced of Jesus' identity and the power he had to change her life, that she had to share it with others. John tells us that she goes into the town and says, 'Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?'

The woman who chose the hottest time of day to perform a grueling physical task in order to avoid the people of her town, is now knowingly, willingly drawing attention to herself – so changed is she by her encounter with Christ. And it's through her testimony that many Samaritans believe. They can see an inexplicable change has taken place in this woman's life and they want to understand what has caused it.

It is through the Samaritan woman's testimony, many are saved. I think most of us will remember hearing a testimony that really impacted or influenced us. Testimonies are powerful. The story of a life radically changed is hard to ignore and harder to forget.

Aline's testimony – one that demonstrates the love of Jesus and of the power of God to transform lives - has had the same impact on her community.

Her reputation is so altered in her community that Aline is now the chairperson of the Village Savings and Loans Association. She is trusted, she is valued, she is accepted. Through the testimony of her transformed life, Aline's community want to experience it for themselves.

Aline's life is the perfect testimony to the power of the project work so many of our partners are engaged in, in Burundi and beyond. There are many women and men, just



like Aline, that we are determined to identify, support, train and release as change-makers into their communities. We want to see the multiplication of change that the Samaritan woman brings to her town through the testimony of her changed life. We want to see the multiplication of transformation that Aline is now leading within her own family and her community.

This amazing story is just one example of the impact that our projects are having around the world. It's thanks to your ongoing support of Christian Aid Week, that our teams can continue to be a voice of hope in some of the most difficult situations imaginable. There are three ways that you can ensure that we have more stories like Aline's to share. Firstly, you can fundraise for us – through events, collections, direct debits or even by leaving a gift in your will. You can also help us act against injustice but raising awareness of the scandal of poverty by contacting your MP or MLA. You can use your voice to make a difference, especially in this election year! And, most importantly, you can pray for Aline, for Burundi as a nation, for those in leadership and for our teams on the ground. Your prayers a vital and very much appreciated – they sustain us and ensure that we are always working within God's will.

It's our prayer-filled hope that Christian Aid will continue to see lives transformed, continue to amplify the voices of the marginalized, and continue to partner with people like you, churches like this and local organisations who are committed to ending poverty, inequality and injustice worldwide.

