

Springs of living water

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, St James Lower Hutt Pentecost 2017

Keynote Bible passages: John 7.37 – 39, 4. 7 -15

1) Introduction: water essential to life on planet earth.

Water is very much a topic of conversation and concern in these days. There's debate about ownership of water, it belonging to nobody, or to everybody. Who has the right to sell our water taken from aquifers below the surface of the land? Locally too and nationally we've become concerned about the purity of water, with toxic substances draining into our lakes and rivers. And may I suggest we are learning that water is not to be wasted.

Then there's also the effect on water of climate change, the melting of glaciers, and shortage of water in some parts of the world notably in Africa in Sudan and South Africa. In our own country, blessed with an abundance of water, some parts are getting more water (including here) and other parts are experiencing less rainfall, such as Marlborough. Water is a precious commodity and indeed critical to life on Planet Earth.

All this has invited us to consider *our relationship* as humans with water. We are coming to be aware of the close relationship Maori have with water as they recognise river and mountain as part of their whakapapa. This relationship is also taken into account in *Christian tradition*. For example one might be mindful of St Francis praising God the Creator for 'sister Water, who is modest and useful and valuable and chaste.'

In Biblical tradition the theme runs throughout Scripture, from the account of creation, the story of the great flood in Noah's time, the parting of the Red Sea for Moses in the Exodus, and 'by the rivers of Babylon' 'we sat down and wept.' Jesus was mindful of water with baptism in the river Jordan and his teaching by the lake called the Sea of Galilee. His teaching refers to water in his referring to 'springs of living water.' This brought to mind the springs of water we are blessed with in this country. One is mindful some places are named, as Maruia Springs. Think of Hanmer Springs and Rainbow Springs. Another spring noted for its purity and volume is Waikoropupu, more commonly known as Puppu Springs near Nelson. Not surprisingly local Maori regard it as sacred. It is claimed to be Australasia's largest spring, the biggest cold-water spring in the Southern Hemisphere and amongst the world's cleanest fresh water. When Jesus referred to a *spring of water* gushing up to eternal life I think of this spring set in beautiful surrounds.

Such would have been different for Jesus in the Holy Land, with it being so dry and in regions quite arid. *Wells* of water were important and one thinks of Jacob's Well where the woman of Samaria met Jesus and which led to the conversation about a spring of water. Then from today's gospel Jesus refers to 'rivers of living water.' For us these references occur in the context of celebrating the coming of the Holy Spirit and hence the particular focus of this sermon.

As we seek to grasp the relevance for today's celebration, it is a reminder of how *essential water is to life*. And its connection to the Holy Spirit derives from the nature of the God in whom we believe of which a part is the 'Spirit, the wind of God which moved over the face of the waters' in Genesis 1.

2) To realise its significance, let's consider first the reference to the '*rivers of living water*' in John 7. We read of Jesus attending the last day of the Festival of Booths, or shelters and more commonly known as the Feast of Tabernacles. The tradition was of the priest drawing water in a golden vessel from the nearby Pool of Siloam, with joyful singing and it was poured on the altar as an offering to God. The worship response was from Isaiah 12 '...with joy you shall draw water out of the wells of salvation.' There is suggested life as in salvation. So it wasn't difficult for Jesus to take this symbolic action as a symbol for the Holy Spirit being poured out thus giving life. However at that time the Spirit hadn't been poured out as John notes 'the Spirit had not been given.' First there had to be death, resurrection, ascension and then came the outpouring on the believers. Prior to that the Holy Spirit had been with Jesus from his baptism and on certain very holy occasions such as Simeon blessing the baby Jesus.

How is this imagery helpful for us in our understanding and experience? I consider it as being an assurance of the nature of God's Holy Spirit which is life indeed. Water was sufficiently important for the Jews to celebrate it in a special festival. As if we need reminder of its importance for us. Our life and living on the 'blue planet' is something worthy of celebration.

3) When we consider the other reference in the encounter at the well the invitation of Jesus is for those who are thirsty to come and drink from this living water welling up. With the passage being one of two key references of Jesus to water it is sufficiently significant to read:

'A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, give me a drink. The Samaritan woman said to him, 'how is it that you a Jew ask of me a woman of Samaria? Jesus answered her, if you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, give me a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep.' Where do you get that living water? Jesus said to her, everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir give me this water so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

This further emphasises the spiritual aspect, in referring to eternal life. The woman didn't quite get it right as she thinks she won't have to come back to the well to draw water. We know Jesus was referring to the satisfying the inner thirst for meaning and purpose in life, and of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. The welling up of the water suggests there's plenty to be received. For us then it is to receive this inner satisfying sense of having purpose in life and open to being guided by God's Holy Spirit. We ascribe to Christ being 'the living water, cleansing, refreshing, making all things new.' We can be filled, or rather topped up as we share in Holy Communion, and the priest asks 'Send your Holy Spirit...so that we, filled with the Spirit's grace and power may be renewed for the service of your kingdom.' Thus there is opportunity to be filled again and again, from the time of our baptism, then confirmation, week by week, and in prayer as being offered today.

In summary, today we celebrate the coming of Holy Spirit, poured out and filling the early believers, the gift that gave them joy and boldness to live the gospel. For us then to receive that living water, welling up as a spring, as we acknowledge our relationship with God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

