

The Living Water of the Spirit by Rev John Castle

A sermon given at St Michael's, Sandhurst
on 28th May 2023 (Pentecost Sunday)

Bible readings: Acts 2:1-21; John 7:37-39

The need for water

Summer is finally here, and no doubt you've been enjoying the sun and perhaps doing a bit of gardening. I'm no gardener, but I do know that in this weather I need to make sure I remember to water George's plants that she's recently planted, otherwise they will die. All living things need water, not least human beings, and according to the charity WaterAid there are 771 million people in the world today who don't have access to clean water near their homes.

Living Water

In the time of Jesus, people had to fetch water from wells, and it was at a well that Jesus met a Samaritan woman, as recorded in John chapter 4. Jesus is thirsty, and asks her for a drink. And then he goes on to use the need for a drink as a metaphor for spiritual thirst, and says that he can give the woman "living water". He continues,

'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.’¹

Jesus knows that the woman is spiritually empty. She has looked for meaning in life through relationships, and after 5 failed marriages is spiritually thirsty. Many people in our world today are also spiritually empty, thirsty for something that will give their lives meaning and bring happiness. Jesus offers something to quench our spiritual thirst – the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The story of Pentecost shows the Holy Spirit represented as a powerful wind and cleansing fire. We certainly need power and cleansing if we are to live as disciples of Jesus. But we also need refreshing. And this is what the story of the Samaritan woman, and today’s Gospel reading explores.

In today’s Gospel reading from John 7, Jesus uses the same metaphor of water to describe the Holy Spirit. He is in Jerusalem for the feast of Tabernacles, or booths. This festival had two functions: a harvest thanksgiving and a way of remembering the time when the people of Israel lived in tents in the wilderness. The festival included the cutting of branches from trees to make shelters or booths. By the time of Jesus it also included two other rituals: the lighting of a great candlestick which lit up Jerusalem at night, and the pouring of an offering of water collected in a golden jug from the pool of Siloam.

¹ John 4:13-14 NRSV

An invitation

It is at the end of this 7-day festival that Jesus announces,

‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”’²

Two Scriptural passages were evoked in the water ceremony in the Festival of Tabernacles. In Zechariah 14:8 we read “On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem”. “That day” was interpreted as meaning the day when Messiah would appear. The same theme is developed in Ezekiel chapter 47, where the prophet has a vision of a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem with water flowing from the Temple, bringing life wherever it flows.

Jesus is saying that he is the one who can give this living water, which is offered to all who believe in him and ask for it. But not only will the living water of God’s Spirit refresh us, if we believe in Jesus and ask him for it; it will flow out from us to bring life to others. In the New Covenant, we the Church are the Temple in which God dwells, and from which living water flows.

The story of Pentecost shows this happening: as the disciples of Jesus are filled with the Spirit, they go out into the streets proclaiming what God has done in Jesus, and inviting others to believe in him and receive his Spirit for themselves. It is through the ongoing witness of the Church down the centuries that we have come to know Jesus for ourselves.

² John 7:37-38 NRSV

Being filled with the Holy Spirit

So what about us? Could we do with some spiritual refreshment? Do we need topping up with the Holy Spirit, so that our faith will be refreshed, and so that the Spirit may overflow from us to others?

If your answer to that question is “yes”, you may be thinking “How can I be filled with the Holy Spirit?” The answer lies in the passages we have just been thinking about. First **believe** (v37-38). Second, **ask** (4:10). We need to pray for ourselves as individuals and for ourselves as a church. We need to ask God to fill us individually and corporately with his Holy Spirit.

The story of Pentecost and the following chapters of Acts show how the Church can grow and be a blessing to others. In our Year of Renewal, we too need a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit, both as individuals and as a church. Would you be willing to pray for that for yourself, and for our church?

Let’s take a few moments to pray.

Listen to these words from Isaiah³:

I will give water to the thirsty land and make streams flow on the dry ground.

I will pour out my spirit on your children and my blessing on your descendants.

They will thrive like well-watered grass, like willows by streams of running water.

³ Isaiah 44:3-4 GNB