

Living water – God’s gift to each one of us

Given by The Revd. Canon Dr. Marion Chatterley 19th March 2017

We’ve been overwhelmed in recent weeks by TV and newspaper footage of the impact of water – both when it’s lacking and when there is an abundance. We’ve seen images of drought and disease and the results of dehydration. There are dusty landscapes and withered plants. We’ve also seen images of the impact of too much water – the flash floods and the ferocious snowstorms; water that engulfs everything in its way.

There have been reports of flood defence initiatives in vulnerable parts of England and stories from people who are taking the precautions they can to prepare for the next act of nature. We’ve read recently about people who have been lost at sea; we’ve just had the anniversary of the Herald of Free Enterprise disaster. And there appears to be little we can do once the water takes charge. If we find ourselves face to face with the power and might of a torrent of water, we stand no chance. If we find ourselves in the midst of parched land with no engineered access to clean water, then we also stand little chance.

On the other hand, we know that people get great pleasure from spending time beside the water. Walking along a beach; climbing up to a waterfall; surfing the waves or sailing in the sun. Water can make us feel good. If I asked you to close your eyes and imagine yourself in a beautiful and peaceful place, many of you would imagine somewhere beside water. Water is vital to life and it also has the capacity to take away life. It can bring us excitement and it can bring calm. It sustains life and enhances life. Water really is the source of life.

In this morning’s Gospel story, Jesus uses the metaphor of water to talk about the love and grace that is offered to us by God. God’s love, God’s grace, God’s power – they are what we want; they are what we need; and at the same time they have the potential to be challenging.

Let's explore this idea by considering firstly what it means to find ourselves in a spiritual drought. Great spiritual writers have considered this in a range of ways but essentially we're talking about the times in our lives when we feel that we're reaching for God and not getting an obvious response. In the same way that places experiencing drought are not without water at all, they are without accessible water – so when we feel an awareness of an absence of God, there is not an actual absence but there is a difficulty or a barrier for us in engaging with our God.

And an absence of that engagement has an impact on our wellbeing. It may be imperceptible at first, but we will gradually begin to show the signs of deep thirst which leads to dehydration. When we thirst for God, we are reaching out for sustenance, for our very survival. The psalmist knew about it when they wrote psalm 42, a version of which we sang as our gradual hymn. Verse 2 says: my soul thirsteth for God, for the living God.

And Jesus reminds us of that very need when he tells the Samaritan woman that this is living water, the water of eternal life. That is the gift that God offered to her and today offers to us. There is no need for us to thirst; there is no need for us to scabble for spiritual survival – this morning's Gospel story reminds us that Jesus offered the living water to the woman at the well; he offers that same living water to each one of us. Every time we have an encounter with the risen Christ, we have the opportunity to drink at that well and to nourish our souls.

So can we think for a moment about the opposite situation, the times when we are overwhelmed by water and have no way to control its impact on us or our communities. History tells us that sometimes rivers breach their banks. Common sense tells us that it is not sensible to build on flood plains. Science tells us that climate change has resulted in more dramatic weather conditions.

It's pretty easy to sit back and say 'not me Gov'. I'm not a house builder or an energy supplier or a civil engineer. But maybe, just maybe we are all in part responsible for climate change. We have consumed food from far away

and bought goods that have been shipped half way round the world and enjoyed foreign holidays and polluting cars etc. This is at least in part a question of stewardship. We are responsible for the world we have been gifted and we are active participants in the evolution of that world.

So what might constitute a spiritual flood and what does our Gospel reading have to say to us on this point? If you accept my premise that flooding is often the environmental impact of stewardship decisions, then a spiritual flood might effectively be the result of poor decision making. If we find ourselves swept away, carried first this way and then that, might we have created a situation where the living water can't be properly used, where it is not in any way contained?

I think it's a question of respect and value. If we really understand that water is precious, that this living water is a gift from God, might we treat it with some reverence and care? If we remind ourselves that the living water, the gift from our maker sustains us and all that surrounds us, then might we stop for just a moment and honour that life force? It may be abundant, it may flow in an extraordinary way, but that does not mean we should take it for granted.

When we find ourselves in holy places, we recognize that fact and behave accordingly. Most of us are respectful when we are in a church or a mosque or a synagogue. We honour the sacred space. When we encounter the full force of God's love and grace, we could, indeed should, honour that. And sometimes we do. And other times we are perhaps pre-occupied or distracted and perhaps we don't fully notice. I think that the key to changing this is to be present, to pay attention, to actively notice when God responds to us and through us.

There will be times when we know we are longing for God and we simply need to remind ourselves that God's love and grace is ready and available. There will be times when we fail to recognize that love and grace, times when we allow ourselves to be carried along by the turbulent waters of our lives.

Through all of those times, that well of living water is a constant. Our access to it is through our living Lord who encounters us in the people we meet, in our times of prayer and, most obviously, in the breaking of bread. When you come for communion this morning and reach out your hands, remind yourself for a moment that you are reaching out to God. You are welcoming our Lord into your life. Take, eat and allow yourself to be nourished.