

## Thirsty for God

## Jn 7:37-39

*On the last day of the feast Jesus stood and cried saying, "If any one is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. He who believes on me, as the Scripture has said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But he said this about the Holy Spirit, which they who believed on him should receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified".)*

*John 7:37-39*

Let me explain the context of this passage.

### *Water in the wilderness*

Sacred festivals (many of them held in Jerusalem, where the Jewish temple was located) were important elements of Jewish religion at the time of Jesus. The Feast of Tabernacles (the one mentioned in the story) celebrated the wanderings of the Children of Israel in the wilderness after they left Egypt. It was also known as the Feast of Booths. Participants lived in booths, or tents, for a week, to remind themselves that their forefathers lived like this as they wandered, under the leadership of Moses. On each of the first six days one of the priests would solemnly pour offerings of water and wine on the altar. As the people watched they would recall that God provided for ancient Israel. He had always been with them, as long as they had obeyed His word and welcomed his presence. God is good. He never abandons those who trust in him. On the seventh day, there would be no such offerings. The obvious lesson was that, if God had not provided for water their ancestors, they would have perished.

The feast was a time of festivity, with gatherings of families and friends in a holiday atmosphere. After a week of celebration it was time to go home.

As Jesus stood watching the people going through the motions, he knew the effects of the party would wear off quickly once they left the charged environment of Jerusalem. When they parted company the crowds would drift back to the habitual residential neighbourhoods or farms, the same family situations, the same problems, habits, work pressures, studies, arguments and struggles. They would deal with the same issues in the usual way. Someone has said that the definition of "madness" is to keep approaching problems the same way and expect different results. Nothing gets better simply by wishing it. Problems do not go away because we close our eyes or look in the other direction. Good health, family stability, personal integrity and spiritual wholeness do not happen just because we hope they will. So, the crowds would go back to the mediocre existence from which they had come and take up where they had left off. In a year's time, they would get ready and return to Jerusalem, to go through the same ceremonies all over again. After a while, it was bound to feel futile.

The Bible says that Jesus had compassion on the common people. They were like sheep without a shepherd, lacking purpose and direction in their lives. They talked about God but their understanding was limited. To most people He resided in the past, in the wilderness. (There are many people alive today who feel the same way.) As far as their day-to-day lives were concerned he was invisible, like an absent landlord, a missing father, laying down the law from afar. And in their hearts all this talk about water and satisfaction only accentuated the sense of thirst they felt for something more in life, happiness, fulfilment, purpose that their religion and circumstances did not (could not) give them. The common religion of Jesus' day promised much but was unable to deliver what people really needed. It was incapable of changing them and satisfying their thirst for something more meaningful and substantial.

The religious leaders Jesus day claimed to have a line to God. They were custodians of the Law, the teachings of the Old Testament prophets, the Torah that showed them how live and the records and memories of God's great revelations, but they had no understanding of his ways. Instead, their religion was dry, legalistic and desiccated. Or it was stagnant; once life (miracles, power, the tangible presence of God) dwelt there, but now it was sour, there was no longer joy. It is similar to expectantly waiting for a drought to end, only to discover that the clouds have no rain, no life. The Jews of Jesus' day had the temple, laws given by God (and men) and traditions, but they didn't have the real thing. People who came went away feeling thirsty. This is why crowds flocked to Jesus when he came. The supreme irony was that the temple was situated over a subterranean river, but no one knew about it or had any idea about how to access its source.

### *Thirsty for God*

Even a cursory reading of the Old Testament reveals the centrality of water in Middle Eastern societies. Wars have been fought over access to water. It is not an infinite commodity that can be wasted. Even today, the future of entire towns depends on continued access to clean water for drinking, stock and crops. Only 3% of the water on earth is fresh, but most of this is locked up in the icecaps. More than one billion people do not have reliable access to safe drinking water. The vast majority of those who die because of a lack of clean water are rural poor people. Hundreds of millions of people have to travel more than a kilometre each way to obtain this precious resource and maintain their livelihoods. Problems of desertification, salinity, receding water tables and privatisation mean that access to drinkable water will continue to be a source of contention around the world.

In Psalm 42, David described his aspirations as follows:

*“As the hart pants after the water brooks, so pants my soul after you, oh God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?” (Psalm 42:1-2).*

But what has this to do with us?

I know people who follow preachers, movements, authors and traditions, going from one conference and convention to another, one church to another, hoping that they are able to provide true satisfaction. Others look further afield in meditation, New Age sects and self-fulfilment programs, all empty wells. Those who focus on what they see and hear in other people end up as thirsty as ever.

There is something in each of us that is only capable of being sustained by God. As water is to life, so God is to the human spirit. Take God out of the picture and we experience spiritual thirst. So we search for answers and try to comprehend him. We look in nature and debate whether it is possible to communicate with him. Nothing else can meet our need for fellowship with God (we are built that way). Jesus is saying that if we are thirsty we can be satisfied by knowing God through him. Jesus came to reveal the Father to us.

*“If any one is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.”*

Jesus used word pictures a lot, earthly illustrations to convey eternal truths. His answer for people attending the Feast of Tabernacles was not a theological exposition – the teachers of Law did enough of that – but to offer a drink to thirsty people.

Jesus said, “He who believes on me will never thirst” (John 6:35). To a Samaritan woman who was smug about her own faith system but lacked an integrated life, he said, “Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 6:35). When we come to God through Christ it is just like turning on a tap. He is able to quench the thirst we all experience, to provide the fulfilment we are all looking for. When that happens we can feel the difference. Isaiah described this life the following way, “With joy you will draw water out of the wells of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3).

We all go through “dry” times. I have travelled through some of the world's driest deserts. They are lonely, quiet, and barren, beautiful in some ways, but devoid of life. On hot days the light plays tricks with your eyes and it seems there is an abundance of water on the horizon. It is a mirage. When you get there the shoreline has receded and only sand remains. However, if and when rain comes (albeit infrequently), a desert can be like a garden for a short period. I have flown over the continent of Australia literally dozens of times. Once the plane leaves the eastern seaboard the countryside quickly turns brown and grazing land gives way to desert. On one occasion, it had rained heavily across the centre and the land was green as far as the eye could see. It is amazing what water can do.

Life is often like that. We feel flat, that we have nothing left to give, the tank is empty, our motivation is gone. It is easy to become disheartened and discouraged, especially if you keep looking at the

surface and expect mirages to be real. Jesus did not just look at the surface; in the same way everyone else did. He was interested in checking out what lay inside. Potential comes from being connected to Him. Let me explain.

My wife and I once travelled on the famous Indian Pacific train across the Nullarbor Plain in southern Australia. We relaxed in the comfort of our luxury carriage and watched the world go by. The word "Nullarbor" comes from the Latin and means "treeless". The description was spot on. There is nothing more than short, scrubby bushes and Spinifex, plus the odd kangaroo. The land is inhospitable, flat (so flat the world's longest single stretch of railway line, several hundred kilometres in length, runs through its heart), yet underneath the sand and rocks are caverns and lakes of water. Many of the indigenous people of Australia live in what Europeans consider "God-forsaken" country that seems to offer nothing. Appearances are deceiving. Aborigines know how and where to dig for water, how to locate supplies of food in places where Europeans would die of hunger and thirst within a few days beneath the unforgiving and scorching sun.

Likewise, when Christ lives inside of us, we can draw on wells we never knew existed. In times of pressure and stress, we can turn to him and find refreshment and strength that do not come from human sources.

#### *A well with no water*

In Australian folklore a popular song describes a "pub" (a hotel) that ran out of beer. Unthinkable. Folks in the Middle East relate similar analogies. The following legend was explained to me by a wizened old man whose verdant orchard was watered from an underground spring on what was otherwise parched and rocky terrain. He knew the importance of a functioning well.

According to the story-tellers, one of the Patriarch Abraham's original wells is located underneath a mosque that was formerly a church, and a popular destination of pilgrims before that. It goes like this:

Father Abraham survived severe droughts by digging wells and tapping into subterranean supplies of water. With the water he extracted he was able to provide for his flocks and family. When he died, ownership of the well passed to Isaac, then to Jacob, then to his sons, and so on, down through many generations. Centuries after the Exodus of the Children of Israel from bondage in Egypt, the site was re-discovered and became a place of pilgrimage. Travellers would stop and think about the faithfulness of God in providing water for his people in an inhospitable land.

While belonging to a local clan that guarded it fiercely, the well remained functional. But over time it came to be regarded as a heritage for the whole nation. One day a visitor decided to throw a small pebble into the well, as an act of affirmation. The echo of the

splash far below resounded in his ears and he knew that God had smiled on his simple act of faith. His camels never got sick, his business increased and he had many sons and daughters, all visible signs of God's divine favour. People heard about him and did the same thing, believing that if they imitated his faith they would also be rewarded. Little by little, the well filled up with pebbles, but no one noticed. Small piles of litter began to accumulate around the mouth. At first the owners would clear away the rubbish, but after a while they stopped caring. There were too many other things to do. The years passed and the story remained alive. The Jewish faith was eventually subsumed by Christianity; the new religion revered Abraham and his sons, so the well passed into Christian lore.

Eventually, a saintly Christian traveller in the Middle Ages, hearing the legend and observing how the well had fallen into disuse cleaned up the site and made a small altar. This subsequently became the centrepiece of a Christian shrine. After the Muslim conquests the shrine was turned into a mosque. The floor was covered with the finest wool carpets and the walls were tiled. Five times a day the muezzin would mount the stairs of the tiny minaret and chant the *Adan*, summoning the faithful to prayer.

Today, the well remains at the centre of the mosque, lying under the ornately decorated *mihrab*, the prayer niche in the wall facing Mecca. Visitors are told the story and revere the memory of the Prophet Abraham who made it all possible.

The irony is: the well is no longer visible. It is full of stones; it is impossible to reach the refreshing water far below. Visitors who are thirsty go away unsatisfied. The well has a reputation for being a place of life, but all the name does is accentuate the thirst of those who come seeking refreshment.

The myth creates a promise that is incapable of being fulfilled. It is important that we not repeat the story in our own lives.

### *Jesus is the source*

People become tired of ritual, of tradition that does not offer life, that is analogous with seeking in dry wells; when we come with expectations we only find rocks and dust, or a well filled with rubbish. Have you gone to a water fountain on a hot day and discovered it was not working? You go away feeling thirstier than ever. But there is an alternative. It involves going, not to the dry fountain, but the source, the eternal spring that will never go dry.

Jesus is that source. He is able to quench your thirst. If you tap into him, the life he gives you will be in you and will flow from you! Surely, that is the best life.