

JOHN 7.37-39: THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF LIVING WATER

[Central Baptist Church, 29 July 2007]

What's the most precious thing in life? What is the one thing you couldn't do without?

The most precious commodity in life is in fact the cheapest - water!

After all the floods of this past week, I guess that the people of Tewkesbury and Gloucester would find it difficult to appreciate water as a gift from God.

And here in Essex, after such a miserable summer, most of us would be grateful if rainfall cut immediately by half.

But could you imagine life without water?

The truth is that life would come to an end without water.

For people like the Jews with the desert on their doorstep, water was something for which you were always grateful..

They made a special point of thanking God for the gift of water at their Harvest Festival, traditionally known as the Feast of Tabernacles, but which the NRSV calls 'the Feast of Booths', & the GNB 'the Festival of Shelters'.

This Feast of Tabernacles was the most popular of the 3 great Jewish festivals (Passover & Pentecost were the other two).

It was an occasion when 1000s of pilgrims flocked to Jerusalem to thank God for his goodness – and not least for his goodness in providing water.

This gratitude for God's provision of water received focus in a special ceremony, which took place every morning of the 7 day-long festival.

At daybreak priests, followed by a crowd of pilgrims, would process from the temple to the pool of Siloam. There they filled a gold jug with water & bore it back to the temple.

On approaching the temple, the trumpet was sounded three times. The priests bearing the water then processed around the altar, while the temple choir sang Ps 113-118 (Hallel Psalms).

When the opening words of Ps 118 were reached, "**Give thanks to the Lord**", every man & boy shook with his right hand a bunch of willow & myrtle tied with palm, and in his left hand held aloft a citrus fruit (a sign of the harvest to come).

The cry "**Give thanks to the Lord**" was repeated three times.

The same operation was repeated when Ps 118.25 reached: "**O Lord save us**".

Finally at the end the priest poured out the water onto the altar as a "drink-offering to God".

Got the picture? White-robed priests with a gold jug - excited crowds waving their bunches of willow & holding up their citrus fruit - sparkling water being poured out on altar – it was a wonderfully exciting occasion.

The rabbis used to say: "*He who has not seen the joy of the water-drawing has not seen joy in his whole lifetime*" (Sukkh 5.1).

Then suddenly, "**on the last and most important day of the festival Jesus stood up & said in a loud voice, 'Whoever is thirsty should come to me, and whoever believes in me should drink'**" (John 37-38a).

Wow! Jesus must have created a sensation that day. It would be a bit like someone suddenly standing up in church and interrupting a sermon.

But however shocking his standing up and interrupting was, the really sensational aspect of that affair was in what Jesus was saying.

For in effect Jesus was saying: *'You're thanking God for water which quenches the thirst of your bodies. But if you really want to live, come to me - come & drink water which will quench thirst of your soul'*.

Any Jew who knew their OT would have realised that Jesus was essentially repeating God's invitation to people thirsty and hungering after him. For in Is 55.1-2 we hear God saying: **"Come, everyone who is thirsty – here is water! Why spend money on what does not satisfy? Why spend your ages and still be hungry?.... Come to me; come to me, and you will have life"**

Similarly Jesus cried out: **"Whoever is thirsty should come to me, and whoever believes in me should drink"**. What an amazing claim!

How could Jesus make such a claim, unless he was the Son of God?

In this respect the words of CS Lewis are instructive: *"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to"*

Not surprisingly, **"there was a division in the crowd because of Jesus"** (7.43).

Some recognised that at the very least this was **"the Prophet"** (7.40) or **"the Messiah"** (7.41), whereas others refused to accept his claim.

Let's examine the claim that Jesus made. It implies three things:

1 WE ARE ALL THIRSTY FOR GOD

"Whoever is thirsty should come to me" (7.37).

The thirst that Jesus had in mind was a thirst for God.

Indeed, that is why many of those pilgrims had made the long journey to Jerusalem.

They were looking for spiritual reality.

What was true of many of Jesus' contemporaries, is true of many of our contemporaries too. We may not actually say: *"I am thirsty for God"*, but we do say, *"Life does not satisfy"*.

Take Boris Becker the German tennis star. At one stage he came close to committing suicide because he was so overwhelmed by a sense of hopelessness and emptiness:

"I had won Wimbledon twice before, once as the youngest player. I was rich. I had all the material possessions I needed: money, cars, women, everything... I know this is a cliché. It's the old song of the movie & pop stars who commit suicide. They have everything, and yet they are so unhappy... I had no inner peace. I was a puppet on a string".

Becker is not alone in being thirsty for meaning, for reality, for God. Jack Higgins, the highly successful thriller writer, who wrote 'The Eagle Has Landed', was once asked what he now knew that he would liked to have known when he was a boy: "*That when you get to the top, there's nothing there*".

Jean Paul Sartre , the French novelist, was an atheist. But he once wrote of this human dilemma with painful honesty: "*That God does not exist I cannot deny, but that my whole being cries out for God I cannot forget*". The cry of the human spirit for something eternal around which to integrate itself is universal. We all feel it. In the words of a preacher in the OT : God has "*put eternity into our hearts*" (Eccl 3.11 NIV).

The fact is that without God we are empty - we are thirsty - we are dissatisfied. In the words of the Psalmist: "**As a deer longs for a stream of cool water, so I long for you, O God. I thirst for you, for the living God**" (Ps 42.1,2a). Or as the early church father Augustine of Hippo (350-430) so exquisitely expressed it: "*You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you*".

We are all 'God-addicts' – there is a God-shaped blank in the heart of us all – for we have all been made '**in the image of God**', i.e. we have all been made to relate to God. Without God, we are never really fulfilled: "*If God is dead, man is dead*".

2. JESUS CAN QUENCH OUR THIRST

"Whoever is thirsty should come to me, and whoever believes in me should drink" (John 7.37).

This was no one off statement – it was no sudden act of exuberance on the part of Jesus. His words on this very public occasion recall words he had spoken privately to the Samaritan woman at the well: "**All those who drink this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again**" (Jn 4.13,14a).

The Samaritan woman had knocked around a good deal – she had gone through a whole series of husbands and was now shackled up with a guy who was not her husband – she no doubt thought that the experience of sex would bring her satisfaction. But not even sex as God intends it truly satisfies. There is a deeper need – and Jesus claims to satisfy that need.

What was true then, is still true now. Jesus still quenches our thirst for spiritual reality - for he is the way to God. Indeed, Jesus on one occasion said to his disciples: "**I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me**". Jesus is the true and living way - he is the only way - to God.

In the words of an old hymn by Horatius Bonar:

*I came to Jesus and I drank
Of that life-giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,*

And now I live in him

Yes, Jesus satisfies the thirsty. Malcolm Muggeridge wrote in his book 'Jesus Rediscovered' 100: "*I may, I suppose, regard myself, or pass for being, a relatively successful man. People occasionally stare at me in the streets – that's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for admission to the higher slopes of the Inland Revenue – that's success. Furnished with money and a little fame even the elderly, if they care to, may partake of trendy diversions – that's pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote was sufficiently heeded for me to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our time – that's fulfilment. Yet I say to you, and I beg you to believe me, multiply these tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they are nothing – less than nothing, a positive impediment – measured against one draught of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty, irrespective of who or what they are. What, I ask myself, does life hold, what is there in the works of time, in the past, now and to come, which could possibly be put in balance against the refreshment of drinking that water?"*

With Jesus life gains a new dimension.

This new dimension is often called "**eternal life**" - it is not so much a life that goes on and on, but rather a life which has a touch of eternity/God about it.

Jesus described this life as "abundant life" [NRSV] or "**life in all its fulness**" (John 10.10).

Or to put it another way: this new dimension is "**Life in the Spirit**".

For after Jesus' claim to satisfy the thirsty, John comments: "**Jesus said this about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were going to receive.** (v39).

How does the Spirit come into it?

As Jesus made clear to Nicodemus, when a man or woman puts their trust in Jesus, Jesus sends his Spirit. The Spirit is the one who makes us spiritually alive, and through his work in our hearts we are 'born again'.

Some people think of Christianity purely in terms of an insurance policy – offering 'pie in the sky when you die' – although that is true, it is also about life in the here and now – life lived with God this side of death – life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit.

John adds: "**At that time the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus had not been raised to glory**" (7.39).

Here we have a reminder that the gift of the Spirit is intimately bound up with the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus.

The new life of the Spirit cannot be experienced until we have come to the foot of the Cross – until we have allowed Jesus to deal with our sin.

For it is our sin which separates us from God.

But once that sin has been dealt with, then we may experience something of the life of the Spirit.

3. OUR THIRST IS QUENCHED WHEN WE BELIEVE

"Whoever is thirsty should come to me, and whoever believes in me should drink".

We are clearly dealing with a metaphor here.

To experience God, to enter into the new spiritual dimension called eternal life, to know the work of the Spirit in our hearts, we must first **"believe"**.

What does it mean to believe? In terms of the metaphor it means not just coming to Jesus, but actually 'drinking' from the water of life he offers.

Imagine yourself lost in the desert - you've run out of water - there you are feebly stumbling along, desperate for water/something to drink - only a matter of hours before you'll die of thirst - and you suddenly come across an oasis with a well. What are your options?

1. You may accept that this well exists - not a mirage - it is for real.
2. You may trust that this well is capable of slaking your thirst and allowing you to live.
3. You may act upon that trust and actually drink some water from the well.

1. It is not enough to believe that Jesus offers the water of life
2. Nor is it enough to believe that he can actually quench your thirst for God
3. It involves actually coming, believing, personalising your faith.

It involves believing that Jesus died for you/to open up a way back to God for you – believing that Jesus rose for you/that you might share in his life – believing that Jesus wishes here and now to give his Spirit to you/that you might have new power to face all the challenges that life may throw at you.

Have you taken that step?

Have you discovered that most precious of gifts - the living water that God gives to all who believe & entrust their lives to his Son?

Nicky Gumbel, the many behind the Alpha course, in his book 'Questions of Life' offers a model prayer to enable the reader to make the journey of faith. Let me conclude my sermon by reading it to you:

"Heavenly Father, I am sorry for the things I have done in my life..... Please forgive me. I now turn from everything which I know is wrong. Thank you that you sent your Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for me so that I could be forgiven and set free. From now on I will follow and obey him as my Lord. Thank you that you now offer me this gift of forgiveness and your Spirit. I now receive that gift. Please come into my life by your Holy Spirit to be with me for ever. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.