

Harvest Thanksgiving: The Gift of Water

John 4:7-15

The poet Philip Larkin wrote:

“If I were called on

To construct a religion

I should make use of water.”

Nearly all religions make use of water. The Book of Genesis links the origins of humanity with the springing up of water. Our emergence from dry dust is linked to the flowing of water. Jesus began his ministry by emerging from the water of the Jordan. Water was such a powerful image that Early Christians thought that all water was blessed.

At the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA last June, as you entered the hall in Portland, Oregon, commissioners were greeted by a huge glass font filled with water. It is an echo of the medieval tradition of placing fonts at the entrances of church naves to remind people as they entered that they were baptised.

Water is a gift from God, and it's right that at Harvest, we give thanks for it. Its use in Scripture and in the world is never far from sacramental. Water gives life. When there is no rain, the land is dry, the crops die, and people are made hungry. How many days can anyone live without water?

Water is not a straightforward image for life. Too much or too little can be devastating. Water can give life and take away life. It is likely that water will gain even more importance in the years to come. In a recent environmental appeal the Archbishop of Cape Town asked for the developed world to change its lifestyle in order that the water of the world might be shared better. Although 75% of the earth's surface is covered by water, less than 1% is usable by humans – soon it is feared we will compete for less water. Wars in the past have been fought over land and oil, in the future it may well be water.

There is no record of Jesus baptising anyone during His ministry, but I can't help but feel that in this edgy encounter at the well with the Samaritan woman, there is something sacramental going on.

By the water at that well, I really wish Jesus had asked the woman what her name was – maybe He did, but the Bible doesn't comment. The woman isn't named. Nicodemus, earlier in the gospel, arrives and departs in darkness; this woman comes in the full brightness of the noonday sun.

There they are: the weary Saviour, sitting at Jacob's well, on His own, a stranger in a strange land, thirsty, and without any means of drawing water from its depths. And the nameless woman, with her difficult past, coming to the well when no-one would be around to judge her or accuse her or denounce her, because it was in the heat of the day. Around water, barriers are both defined and made fluid. In this encounter the male Jewish rabbi should not be speaking to a Samaritan woman. Many assume that she was broken and hurting, but it is not evident, though it may be true. This Samaritan lady had clearly been around.

With the water of life around them, maybe even between them, with probable levels of tension being hinted at, what was Jesus' response? Not judgement. Not exclusion. Simply encounter and interest. Like the time when a woman who had dabbled in prostitution came to see a priest: "But Father," she said, "I am a fallen woman!" "No, my dear," he replied, "you merely tripped."ⁱ Jesus spoke, she spoke. No cold shoulder.

Jesus didn't name her, He certainly didn't baptise her, but this is a sacramental moment. In the welcome and the acceptance, through the metaphor of the living water that was between them something sacramental happens. Here is a sign of the graciousness of God. Here is a symbol, a word of life in water that speaks of the presence of the Spirit of God.

In baptism the symbolism of water is not simply about cleansing, it is about inclusion. Martin Luther, feeling discouraged on one occasion, reminded himself: "I am baptised, and through my baptism God, Who cannot lie, has bound Himself in covenant with me."ⁱⁱ At the well of living

water, Jesus engaged with a nameless woman, and though there was no literal baptism, I can't help but believe that the beginnings of a spiritual one took place. The woman not only began to understand a little more about herself, she began to discover a little more about Jesus. She became more fully alive. She asked questions. She came seeking water to drink, and engaged with an equally thirsty Saviour, also seeking water. Through the living water they encountered each other, and, it may just be, she had a new beginning.

Water is a powerful gift from God. Water in baptism is a powerful symbol of God's Spirit washing over us, reminding us of God's love and God's new beginnings. Christianity will flourish in the C21st if we grasp that the Church is above all the community of the baptised. Not a closed cistern, but an open well with a spring of living water. Baptism may seem like an unremarkable event, in essence the splash of a little water, and the uttering of a few words.ⁱⁱⁱ But it is the wet symbol of God's grace and welcome. If water is a word of life, might it be that we are to live as God's wet Christians, drenched in God's grace and love, and not as desiccated fossils drained of human kindness and joy and welcome and wonder?

The woman and the well and the Saviour; an unexpected conversation took place between unexpected people meeting beyond convention and across boundaries; the living water flowing beneath them and around them. They were both thirsty for water, the water of life; the water that had unexpectedly brought sinner and Saviour together. We will never know if it ended with baptising and naming, but we do know that it started with a little cup of cool water, offered in love; the beginning of a journey to salvation through inclusion and grace. How thirsty are you?

This Harvest Thanksgiving, give thanks for the wonderful gift that is water.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ *ibid*, p155

ⁱⁱ Martin Luther, 'The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism', Luther's Works vol 35

ⁱⁱⁱ Radcliffe, p1