

Trinity Baptist Church

Trinity, 2 January 2022: Living Water – Ron Jones

John 4: 7 - (?)16; 7: 37 - 39

So: the Christmas rush is over. I need to tip my hat here to our former pastor, who used to insist that Christmas lasted for 12 days - and yes, we're singing carols today; but you know what I mean. Decorations come down in the next few days, recycling bins are overflowing - and I wonder whether you also feel that sense of slight let-down. It creeps up on us in different ways. When I was a child, my mother always had Christian calendars: there was a back-board with a picture and text for the year, and a date block, with a tear-off date slip for each day with a Bible verse on it. Naturally those date blocks used to become very thin as Christmas approached, with only a few daily slips left. But now there would be a new calendar waiting to be hung up, with a very thick date block indeed; and it seemed to underline the inevitability of going back to school soon, and the huge load of year that would have to be got through before Christmas came again. I also remember Linus, in the "Peanuts" cartoon strip, crying because he was being made to write thank-you letters for toys he'd already broken.

So Jesus' words "If anyone is thirsty..." are very much to the point for us on this first Sunday of 2022.

Actually, these words ought to make us stop and think whenever we come across them, not just at New Year. The words "living water" mean "RUNNING water" as opposed to water in a well, or pool - there isn't any suggestion in the phrase itself of anything special or high-powered in the water itself. BUT:- there are three factors in this which aim it at us, fair and square:-

- The living water is an experience;
- It is designed to stop you being thirsty;
- It will always be fresh.

It's particularly telling when Jesus shouts this out at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. This was a major event each year, and its last day featured the cleansing of the altar, when large volumes of water would be used. Jesus contrasts this neatly with the outflowing of "living water" from those who would come to him and drink. But do you remember Elijah on the mountain? How he heard God, not in the tornado, hurricane or raging bush fire, but in a whisper? Now look at Jesus here, himself "The Word" - and The Word SHOUTED.

I grew up in a church where they believed that most of the Holy Spirit's outward activity had stopped with the age of the apostles, and there was official opposition to what was then called the Charismatic Movement. That wasn't exactly why we left, actually, but when we joined Trinity I had some serious thinking to do, because for years I had followed that church's line on this subject. This view is called "Cessationism", and it originated as long ago as John Calvin. I found that Trinity people didn't actually swing from chandeliers, or indulge in any wild excesses as I thought charismatics did. Instead there was a gentle openness to the ministry of the Holy Spirit, to speaking in tongues, prophetic words and so on. So after a few months here, once we had settled in, I decided to research the entire New Testament, to comb it for all references to the Holy Spirit, list them out, and try to work things out all over again. I was looking for some rigorous theological teaching, particularly in the epistles, but I decided to start with the Gospels - and I got as far as John Chapter 7 and stopped: I had found what I needed. You see, I had always believed that (as the Bible clearly teaches) you receive the Holy Spirit when you become a Christian; but I thought of it as a sort of done deal, and that experiences were somehow beside the point. In John 7 it hit me: you can't be thirsty (physically, I mean) without feeling it: in other words, it's an experience. And by the same token, when that thirst is satisfied it must also be an experience - you feel better. The text gives us no wriggle room on this, none whatsoever: it explains that Jesus meant the Holy Spirit when he spoke of the living water. So, while the Bible does teach that the Holy Spirit indwells a Christian from the point of

conversion, we also have to believe that it is possible to experience the Holy Spirit, and that this can come as a huge relief.

But why did Jesus shout? One obvious reason would have been his intense desire for his earthly people, the Jews, to realise who he was and come to him and believe. But that shout echoes across the years to us in a different way: because it's still possible to live some sort of Christian life, whether committed and dedicated or on the slack side, and live with a sense of dissatisfaction. And part of the root of this can be a feeling of being threatened by the Holy Spirit.

Feeling threatened is a peculiar thing. If you are insanely good at something I wish I could do as well as you can, and I encounter you in a great flush of excitement, applause and satisfaction because you have just achieved some notable triumph in this skill of yours, it's far easier for me to decide that I don't like you very much, than to own up to myself that actually I feel threatened by your success. You know what I mean! So though we definitely need to deal with the idea of being threatened by the Holy Spirit, we must take it very carefully to avoid indulging in a sort of self-protective trip mechanism that insists on changing the subject.

Moreover: Jesus shouted this message "on the last and greatest day of the feast". Have you ever come back from a special festival (Keswick? Soul Survivor? Spring Harvest?) and felt flat? Felt that sense of quiet desperation in those last hours when the company is breaking up, last night's final celebration was simply out of this world but all these wonderful people are loading their cars and you won't see them again, the stage in the Big Top is being dismantled, you will shortly be driving out of the main gate - and you haven't got what you came for? Still thirsty on the last and greatest day of the feast?

And look what he actually shouted: not berating them for their lack of belief, but giving them an urgent, kind invitation. "I can give you something that would answer your deep thirst: why don't you come to me and drink?"

There are a few things we need to sort out here. Firstly, God definitely believes in special occasions. He gave the Israelites their major feast days. Psalms 120 / 135 symbolise a long journey up to Jerusalem for one of these feast celebrations; the old Authorised Version calls these psalms the "Songs of Degrees", while our NIV has "Songs of Ascents". Psalm 122 starts with "***I was glad when they said to me, 'Let's go up to the House of the Lord'***". Now, special occasions are exactly what they say: SPECIAL occasions. It's so tantalising to wish that our whole life could be like this, but in sober fact it was never meant to be. The heady atmosphere of the big meet-up is not what Jesus meant when he spoke of the Living Water welling up to eternal life.

Secondly, we need to look what unsatisfied desires are like. An example of what I mean involves a man called John I used to work with when he and I were in our teens. He and I got on well. John, like a lot of guys, used regularly to go out at weekends and deliberately get drunk. I remember him, probably on a Monday morning, moaning about his awful headache. He knew I was a Christian, and occasionally the subject would come up in a friendly and unstressed way. I asked him one day what impelled him to get slaughtered so regularly when he knew what the unpleasant end result would be. He knew I wasn't criticising him, but was just curious to explore how it was for him. His reply was that, yes, it was awful afterwards, but it just felt so good while you were doing it. So come Friday night he and his mates would be off to the pub again, and so it would go on.

This actually gives us a clue, I think, to why we feel unsatisfied some (if not most) of the time; so I want to look with you at the whole subject of Enjoyment or Satisfaction. Now, the Bible definitely states that God gives us richly everything for our enjoyment. We also know that many people do not have so many "things to enjoy" as we ourselves have, and that this can give rise to discontent. But there is a factor here which is both very widespread, and yet so hard to grasp: the Elephant in the Room. I mean that the people who have the most things are more often than not the most miserable. What's going on here?

The oldest story in the Bible tells how God created Adam and Eve for a close relationship with himself, and that the Fall then happened and spoiled everything. That left humanity with all the equipment, so to speak, for a satisfying relationship with God, but now with a fatal break in the connection, and it follows that this must leave us with an incurable ache deep inside. Of course we also know that Jesus came to save us from these consequences, and in doing so to redeem the entire creation. But now think of the amount of New Testament which has to teach us how to live - and you can see from the sheer size of this that God's rescued people have a huge amount of re-learning to do.

Augustine got it right when he wrote: **"Thou hast created us for Thyself, and our heart is not quiet until it rests in Thee."** This is exactly why, I am sorry to say, the novelty of what you were given for Christmas will wear off, if it hasn't done so already: because THINGS were never designed to satisfy that deep soul-hunger which we all carry. I have a couple of hobbies which can involve acquiring stuff, and I know exactly what it feels like to have taken delivery of something I've been looking for and anticipating for some while - and that while I'm glad it's arrived the initial fizz has soon gone out of it. We're all in this together!

Does this mean that it's wrong to enjoy things? No, of course it doesn't: God gives them to us and we are and should be grateful. However, it does mean that we need to focus our deepest desires on something other than things. The American author John Eldredge analyses it very perceptively. Writing of the satisfaction obtained from good things and other experiences, he writes:- ***"Because the gratification touches us in that heart-place made for transcendent communion without itself being transcendent, it attaches itself to our desire with chains that render us captive."...."This taste of transcendence, coming as it does from a non-transcendent source, has the same effect on our souls as crack cocaine."*** This is virtually a re-phrasing of Augustine's comment: **"Our heart is not quiet until it rests in Thee"**.

Jesus says that whoever drinks ordinary water will get thirsty again, whereas "the water that I shall give him...". Jesus then rubs this in when he speaks - no, **shouts**, at the end of a big festival when it's nearly time to go home, about streams of running water that will flow from the believer. So that must mean plenty for the individual Christian and plenty for those with whom he comes into contact - and it's contrasted with the obvious activity of "going up to the feast". For that, substitute "going to Spring Harvest" or whatever big Christian event you may have in mind. Don't mistake me here: God does operate in these events, and it can be, and probably will be, a great blessing to you to go: but where it goes off the rails is when we fasten on the logistics and environment of the Event, rather than a close, intimate, personal relationship with Jesus.

Isn't it difficult to achieve spending time with God, just you and him? I am speaking with regret here - I am not a shining example of what I'm talking about. Making time, of course, implies pushing aside other activities - and that is SO difficult. In Genesis 26 you can read about Isaac's life in the land God promised to Abraham, and much of it has to do with wells. The Philistines envied Isaac because he was so wealthy, and they got at him by filling up with earth and stones the wells which Isaac's men had dug. So Isaac's men had to dig the rubbish out of these wells. They also dug new wells, and often the locals disputed their ownership, so Isaac's men had to move on elsewhere and dig again. But look at the gruelling work this must have entailed: either digging a new well, or clearing out the rubble that the opposition had shovelled into an old one. We can be quite sure that if we decide to put aside time to spend with God there will be plenty of reasons why it can't be done just yet, or just now - and it will be hard work to clear the rubble away. Digging a well would have involved a great deal of back-breaking work before they reached the water, and it might not even turn out to be drinkable. Also, compare the time it would take to spoil the well with rubble with the time and difficulty it would take to clear it out.

Church has not been plain sailing recently, has it? We are all hoping and praying that the Covid situation will settle down and that we will be able to regain some normality. But here we are at the start of 2022: could we resolve to seek the Lord individually as we go into the months of the New Year? Dig out those wells? That must have an effect on our whole worship life - mustn't it? Are we thirsty?

So far we have been looking at ourselves as individuals - but it can also apply to God's people as a body. Do you remember in Luke chapter 2, when Joseph and Mary took the 12-year-old Jesus up to Jerusalem for the Passover feast? At the end, Jesus stayed behind in the temple and they didn't realise it. The passage says that they "thought he was in the company", and that it was only at the end of the first day back on the road that they realised he wasn't there. They must have been at their wits' end. But the passage makes the point that, while it took them one day to lose him, it took them three days to find him again. It's another version of the rubble in the well, isn't it? Easy to lose, hard work to find. Wouldn't it be tragic if here at Trinity we just "thought he was in the company"?

We know Jesus' words that "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the middle of them". But I wonder whether there is a hidden warning in those words too. God's grace is limitless: we can sometimes arrive at church in anything but a suitable frame of mind for worship, and so often God is gracious to us and lifts us out of it and into his presence. Yes: but the passage doesn't say "Where two or three are gathered out of habit and a sense of duty.." or "Where two or three are gathered wishing they'd stayed at home.." or "Where two or three are sitting as far as possible from the people they don't get on with.."! We need not only to spend time with him during the week, but to make coming to meet him in church the main, active motive for coming to a service. Perhaps that would put these other motives in perspective (or off-limits).

There's a most poignant passage in Hosea, a book which is full of God's weariness and disappointment with Israel and his judgement on them. It's at the opening of Hosea chapter 6: it acknowledges the judgement, which isn't part of our topic this morning, but is an expression of longing to come back to the Lord. **"Let us acknowledge the Lord, let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth"**. There's a grand 18<sup>th</sup> century hymn based on this passage: I'd like to finish by reading an extract from it:-

**"Long has the night of sorrow reigned - The dawn shall bring us light;  
God shall appear, and we shall rise With gladness in his sight.**

**"Our hearts, if God we seek to know, Shall know him and rejoice;  
His coming like the dawn shall be, Like morning songs his voice.**

**"As dew upon the tender herb, Diffusing fragrance round,  
As showers that usher in the spring And cheer the thirsty ground,**

**"So shall his presence bless our souls, And shed a joyful light;  
That longed-for dawn shall chase away The sorrows of the night."**

So let's face up to the Holy Spirit, individually and as a church; let's resolve to make private time for Jesus, and in doing both let's use the opportunity to "come to him and drink". And I wish you all a happy and SATISFIED New Year.