

19.05.19 See, I am making all things new!
Revelation 21:1-6 St John's URC Julian Templeton

I think the most thirsty I have ever been is when I went on a tramp (hike) in New Zealand with some friends and we had some hours before drunk all the water we had with us; and as the sun beat down we became hotter, perspired more, and became very thirsty. In NZ you are often not far from water; the challenge is finding it. So when we came across a small stream we fell upon it and drank the cool, refreshing, clear water with great relief. I don't water had ever tasted so good!

Water is essential to renew and sustain life, and water is often used as a metaphor for the life that God gives by his grace.

See, I am making all things new! (Rev. 21:5)

This is the message of renewal that John receives from God, seated on the throne, and from it I take my message today, which is:

God loves us with an unfailing love, and when we thirst for that love, he renews us by his grace

We all need renewal by God's grace, for without renewal life can go from good to bad, and from bad to worse. The revelation that John receives envisions terrible events that, early on, go from bad to worse. Seven angels in succession blow a trumpet and release a succession of disasters on the earth: fire burns the trees and grass; a landslide pollutes the sea; a meteor pollutes the rivers and springs; the stars and planets collide; plagues kill many people; and giant scorpions—the size of horses—torment God's people so much that the long to die (Rev. 8-9)! This is followed by war in heaven

between Michael and his angels and the dragon and his angels; and after this, two beasts, in succession, arise, who wage war on God's people (Rev. 12-13). It is a vision as terrifying as anything you are likely to see in 'Game of Thrones'.

Today life can go from good to bad, and from bad to worse, unless it is *renewed*. Let me give three examples. The first example is the natural world. It seems that the increasing human demand for resources and development is exacting a terrible cost on the natural world in the change of our climate, the problem of pollution, and the threat to animal and plant species. But this very natural world that sustains us. Unless the natural world is allowed to renew itself, the future for all living things, including humans, is threatened.

The second example is politics: we urgently need a renewal of our political life. The attempt to implement Brexit has caused a virtual paralysis in government, and political parties are deeply divided about it. It is, I think, too easy to blame politicians for this; they are in many respects lightning-rods of public opinion. The uncomfortable truth is that the 2016 European Referendum exposed deep divisions in society. It exposed, so it seems, competing and contradictory ideas about what it means to be British in relation to Europe. If we are to get out of the current atmosphere of rancour and recrimination we need somehow to renew our sense of identity and our political discourse: learning how to disagree well. We can't do that if we opt out of voting altogether. I urge you to cast your vote the EU elections this Thursday, and commend the resource '*Think, Pray, Vote*' produced on behalf of the URC, Baptist and Methodist Churches and the Church of Scotland: <http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/european-elections-2019/>

The third example is the life of a church. Unless there is a renewal of faith and commitment and energy to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others, a church will get gradually smaller and older. When there are no new people willing to become Christians; when leaders and volunteers can no longer be found from the congregation to carry out a church's essential tasks: a church loses the ability to renew its life. What every church needs, regardless of size and age-profile, is renewal by God.

Having come through the terrible events that have afflicted God's people, John sees a new heaven and a new earth. He sees the holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And he hears a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, God now makes his home with his people. He will dwell with them; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. For the first things have passed away. See, I am making all things new! These words are trustworthy and true. I am the Alpha and Omega, the First and Last, the Beginning and End. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of life.' (21:1-6)

And in the next chapter, John sees a further vision of what that water looks like. An angel shows John inside the new Jerusalem where he sees the river of the water of life, sparkling like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the city's street. On either side of the river stands a tree of life, yielding fruit in all seasons, the leaves of which are for the healing of the nations. (22:1-2)

I believe God's message for us today is:

See, I am making all things new! God loves us with an unfailing love, and when we thirst for that love, he renews us by his grace.

When we speak about that for which we thirst, we are speaking about *desire*. St Augustine argued that all of us, ultimately, desire God. That is, ultimately what we want is to love God and be loved by God because God is the perfection of beauty and goodness and truth and justice and love. Our desire for God is often expressed through other things, that is, through our desire for human love, for security, for beauty, for happiness. All these things may provide us with some satisfaction, so long as we seek them in the right ways. Sometimes we look for satisfaction in the wrong places, with the wrong people, we damage ourselves, and we hurt those who love us. Wherever we seek satisfaction, ultimately, only God fully satisfies. Only God loves us with an unfailing and unconditional love. God says to us through Jesus: 'I am your God; become my beloved covenant-partner.' Jesus is the source of our *regeneration* as we are born anew, through Baptism and through faith. Through faith, the Cross on which Jesus dies for our sins becomes the Tree of Life (Rev. 22:2). We are released from the burden of guilt and denial when we repent and receive God's forgiveness.

Thereafter, we are ever in need of renewal; we always thirst for the living water that is God's grace. God's grace comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ. In the Gospel According to John, Jesus says:

'All who are thirsty, come to me and drink. Those who believe in me shall find streams of living water flowing from within them.'
(John 7:37-38)

Jesus seems to be saying that when we learn to trust in him, we will find hidden resources of grace welling up within us. We will find the patience to deal with difficult situations and difficult people; we will find the stamina to keep going when we need to do so; we will find the faith and hope and love we need to live, and live well.

Unlike physical resources, all of which are limited; the living water of God's grace is unlimited and superabundant. The more you put grace into action, the more there is to go around. When you do something kind for someone, that person is likely to do something kind for someone else. When we put grace into action it becomes a virtuous circle. That circle ultimately finds its fulfilment in the blessedness of the new heaven and the new earth.

FW Faber envisages that blessed state in his hymn, 'There's a wideness in God's mercy', when he writes:

There is grace enough for thousands
of new worlds as great as this;
there is room for fresh creations
in the Lord's unfathomed bliss.

Let us find our satisfaction in God, who loves us with an unfailing love; God, the Source of living water, and seek his renewing grace, and claim his promise:

See, I am making all things new!

Thanks be to God.

Hymn

"See, I am making all things new;
Come, drink the water all who thirst,"
so says our God whose word is true,
drink from the Source, both last and first.

New is the heaven, new the earth,
new is the city, shining bright,
new is the vision we can see
when faith beholds God's glorious light.

God will dwell with us, we with him,
we'll be his people; he, our Lord
wiping each tear from every eye,
death will be past and life restored.

Come now, renewing Lord, inspire
our work of faith and hope and love.
You make the Cross the Tree of Life,
healing the nations from above.

"See, I am making all things new,"
so says the Lamb whose death is past.
Come and repair the tired and torn;
come resurrect both first and last.

Words: © 2019 Julian Templeton (inspired by Revelation 21-22);
Tune: *Angels' Song*, Orlando Gibbons