

Thinking water in mission

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Pause for a moment and recall freely your own personal experience and contact with water: its types (rainwater, sea, pipe-borne, well, tap, river, ocean, fountain water, lakes, reservoirs, the oasis in the desert) and usages. You cannot go through the day without needing water in one form or another: for drinking, washing, cooking, watering the lawn. For some countries, like Britain and Ireland, water forms a natural, undisputed boundary different from internal, often disputed boundaries. Water features in such occupations as fishing and sailing. It is needed for operating cars and other locomotives. Many of God's beautiful creatures live in and can only survive in water as their natural habitat. Water also features in many novels and legends such as *The Lady of the Water* and *Lady Precious Stream*. It functions in the medical profession as therapy and base for a number of medicines.

On the spiritual level there are many beloved biblical passages which draw our attention to the importance of water. 'Oh you who are thirsty, come to the waters' (*Isaiah 55.1-2*); 'With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation' (*Isaiah 12.3*), and major events that happened in water. 'Moses' means drawn from water (*Exodus 2.10*). He later became God's instrument in rescuing Israel from drowning on the Red Sea (*Exodus 14.15-31*). Elijah on Mount Carmel proved to the Israelites that as water could not prevent God's fire from consuming wood soaked and drenched in it, neither could Baal be considered stronger than Yahweh who deserved their full allegiance (*1 Kings 18.20-40*).

Water and mission

This very importance of water leads us to ask how water can help us to think and act mission. Mission is as essential to the life of the

church as water is to human and organic life. As one cannot live without water, neither can the church live without mission. In the great missionary eras of the 19th and 20th centuries, mission was perceived largely in terms of winning pagan souls for Christ. The Catholic Church often described this as rescuing souls from drowning and placing them in the safety of Peter's barque, a reverse action of what the sailors did to Jonah. Today the same Church believes that 'the church is missionary by nature' (Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes*, no.2). It exists through mission and for mission. The church itself was born of Christ on Calvary, through Jesus' mission, the accomplishment of which was symbolised by water. Julian of Norwich and Anselm of Canterbury noted this long ago. At his death Christ gave the Spirit, and blood and water gushed out of his pierced side, as happens when a woman gives birth (*John 19.30,34*). Jesus himself, God-word Incarnate (*John 1.1, 14*), had been filled with the Spirit from conception (he 'was conceived of the Holy Spirit'). At his baptism in the Jordan, he received fully in his human nature the Spirit of mission (*John 1.32*). This Spirit led him through a period of testing and strengthening in the desert. When ready he began, in the Spirit, his mission of proclaiming the good news to the poor, setting free captives and proclaiming God's jubilee year for the entire creation (*Luke 4.18-19*). Later he commissioned his followers to go out to the entire world and proclaim the same good news of liberation which he won for all on the cross (*Matthew 28.19-20*). This is the heart of mission, to proclaim the good news of God's liberation of humanity from sin, especially the anthropological sins of racism, classism and sexism (*Galatians 3.28*). Our call and identity as church in mission is to celebrate this liberation among us and proclaim to the entire creation that God in Christ has reconciled humanity to the divine self and to one another. We do this wherever we are, in the home, at work, in school, clubs, the farm, the church. God's freeing and liberating Spirit fills the entire universe without discrimination based on sex, race, class, creed or colour. When God freed us, God really intended us to be free (*Galatians 5.1*). It was this liberating Spirit that was given by Christ to the Cross, this Spirit symbolised by the gushing of water from his side.

Water and the Spirit

How does all this relate to our central reflection on water in mission? As noted in *'To Cast Fire Upon the Earth'* (which describes the project of Bible Studies and Mission [BISAM], an Interest Group of the International Association for Mission Studies), the mission of the church is fully the work of God's Spirit. When water, fire and wind (three of the four traditional elements) symbolising the Spirit in its fullness, combine in us (God's Spirit-filled people) to act upon the earth (the fourth element), the result will be the dawning of the new heaven and new earth, the promised restoration and transformation of the first creation promised in Revelation 21.1. Since mission is as necessary for the life of the church as water is for human life, the Church, that is, all of us, needs the Spirit/Water to carry out this mission... At baptism, the foundational sacrament of initiation, we are born of God through the engendering by the Holy Spirit and become God's flesh and blood children in Christ (*John 1.12-13; 20.17; 1 John 3.1-3, 9*). This new birth destines us to participate in Jesus' life and mission, failing which we betray our very identity and nature.¹

The sea/ocean water which girds our earth is one mass, punctuated by masses of dry land. In the beginning of creation, water existed before God caused the earth, dry land, to emerge from it (*Genesis 1.2, 9-10*). Because of this intrinsic unity and constant motion of water, one current can travel millions of miles around the globe annually. What we do to the sea water in our locality (whether we keep it pure or pollute it) therefore influences seawater everywhere, though local conditions can modify such influences. The land mass is far smaller than the water mass. Earth needs water to survive and bear fruit, but water does not need earth. God's Holy Spirit/Water who hovered over creation and brought it into existence, continues to hover over the entire redeemed creation filling it with life and bringing it to the fullness of redemption (*compare Romans 8.21-23*). Thus, as at the first creation everything came to be through the action of the Holy Spirit, energising God's word (*Genesis 1.3; John 1.3-4*), so it is with the new creation. The Old Testament speaks of this in the visions of Ezekiel 47.1-12, and the Wisdom appeal of Isaiah 55.1-2. The New Testament

identifies the Spirit as the life-giving water which Jesus gives freely to any who thirsts and desires to drink (*John 7.37-39*). He promises the Samaritan woman an unending well of water inside her and all who desire it, welling up, leaping and bouncing with joy to eternal life.² In this energising action of the Spirit, all stand equal; none needs to go drawing water from other people's wells, with the inconvenience of time and contraptions necessary for such activity. Yet all are united since 'In the one Spirit all were baptised and one and the same Spirit was given to each to drink' (*1 Corinthians 12.12-13*).

'Living water' has two dimensions. On the natural cultural level, it signifies spring or running water, different from well or cistern water provided by human beings and dependent on them for continued existence (eg, by digging the well deeper and ensuring that enough rain water enters the cistern). On the spiritual level, living water (symbol of the Spirit) signifies water that is alive in itself and alone can give life (*John 6.63*). This double meaning gives a rich insight into Jesus' promise to the Samaritan woman in *John 4.5-42* and to his audience in Jerusalem in *John 7.27-39*. He promises that a fountain of living water will flow from him eternally into the bosom of believers, as the sap flows from the vine into its branches to cause them to live and bear fruit (*John 15.1-17*). As Jesus received the Spirit without measure, he gives it to his brothers and sisters without measure (*John 3.34*). It is all God's work (*1 Corinthians 3.9; Ephesians 2.10*).

By creation and by new birth in Christ, we have a common origin and destiny to be God's Spirit-filled people who bear lasting fruit. As one ocean current travels around the globe, so does the Spirit, moving actively 'all over the world' bring to birth a new heaven and earth. This new heaven and earth are marked by crystal clear river water, crystal clear, because no works of darkness find a place there (*Revelation 21.8; 22.3*). These waters feed medicinal and ever fruitful trees for the healing of the nations. The ultimate goal of mission is this healing of the nations. Our 'thinking water in mission' must therefore lead us to engage in this healing activity, mediating and proclaiming God's jubilee year for the entire creation (*2 Corinthians 5.18-21*).

As a church in mission

What can we draw from this reflection for our personal and communal participation as a church in mission? Two suggestions are offered here:

1. The reflection draws our attention to the unity of Christians and peoples of other faiths all over the world. We all come from and are sustained by one and the same Spirit of God, as the hymn proclaims, 'We are one in the Spirit we are one in the Lord... and we pray that unity may one day be restored... We will hold each one's dignity and guard each one's pride, and they'll know we are Christians by our love...'; 'God is love' and God's children cannot be otherwise (1 John 4.7-12).
2. A project on mission which is sponsored by the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, has the title, *Currents in World Christianity*. When requested to give a paper at its seminar in March 1999, I noted that a significant feature of currents is that they never remain steady but flow constantly into one another so that it becomes impossible to isolate one from the other. So it is with us as currents in the water of God's Spirit. We need to allow ourselves to become Christ's currents energised and moved by the Spirit to reach out beyond the boundaries of race, creed, sex, colour, social location and all other boundaries that we have set in human history to divide and decimate us from becoming the people God intended and still intends us to be. Our identity as Christ's currents challenges us to stay open to people and gospel values of other cultures, embrace and promote them as our own, knowing that they belong to God who cherishes and keeps them in existence (*Wisdom 11.24-12.2*). We need not travel a long way to do this. Information technology has placed the world within our reach and the world itself is becoming truly multicultural, a global village in the making. The place to watch for action and conversion is our attitudes towards those we deem different from us in any way. We can enrich and allow ourselves to be enriched by the hymns, rites and rituals of other cultures by celebrating

them and welcoming and promoting the different charisms which the Spirit gives for the building up of the body of Christ, the church, God's household, which is ultimately the entire universe, not just the Christian community.

The BISAM project mentioned earlier rightly sees collaboration (intercultural, interdisciplinary, interfaith) as the soul of its doing mission. But if we prevent our currents, the currents of our lives and properties from flowing freely as currents naturally do, our own waters will pile up to cause a huge flood in one place and a drought in the other. Some will drown in the flood of cumulative wealth while others will die of starvation and even physical drought. The result is harmful to both parties. The early Christian community, a Spirit-filled community, translated its experience of oneness in the Spirit into the creation of a new social order where all their members held all things in common, none was ever in want (*Acts 2.37-42; 4.32-37*). Can we who believe we have received Christ's Spirit/Water today return to our gospel roots, and, collaborating with peoples of good will world-wide, translate our belief into the creation of a new social order for our times? If we do, we will surely transform the current dominant and dominating world value system, rooted in and built on capitalism, the powers of the market and personal profit. This self-centred system is harmful to both the rich who are getting richer and the poor who are continually impoverished. If we can face this challenge and allow ourselves to move as Christ's currents driven by the Spirit into the new creation, we will together be co-operating with God in the divine mission of reconciling the world to the divine self.

The new heaven and earth which this mission seeks to establish is ultimately for us, not for God; can we reject its coming? We end our reflection on *Thinking Water in Mission* with a prayer that God may generate and sustain within us individually and corporately that river of living water which will well up to eternal life in us and move us actively to create room for others to live and be or move us from

isolation into communion. Then we will not see others as dependent on us for the water they need for their God-given life, but will make it our duty to see that the resources God has given freely to humanity are equally shared. 'To the thirsty I will give from the fountain of the water of life without payment' (*Revelation 21.6; Isaiah 55.1*). May God make us active participants in this divine project.

Notes

- 1 See further T Okure, ed., *To Cast Fire Upon the Earth: Bible and Mission Collaborating in Today's Multicultural Global Context*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2000, esp. p. 25; eadem, 'John', in *International Bible Commentary: A Catholic and Ecumenical Resource for the Twenty-First Century*; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998, 1438-1505, especially the comments on the verses cited here; eadem, 'The Significance Today of Jesus' Commission to Mary Magdalene', *International Review of Mission* LXXXI/322 (1992) 177-188, esp. pp. 182-188.
- 2 See further T Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4.1-42*, Tübingen: JCB Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1998

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