

## ***Rivers of Living Water***

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### **Behind the Text**

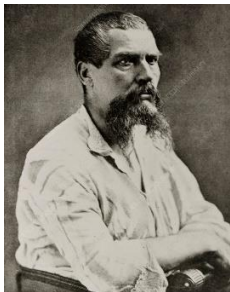
This morning is about that famous phrase in John's Gospel... ***Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'***<sup>i</sup>

Rivers of living water! This is one of the most wonderful metaphors in all of the Bible!

So, let's enjoy some reflections on this passage this morning and see what we take away for life.

I begin by talking about water... well, it's absence. I love travel stories of the great explorers, those people who went where no one had ever been. Two of my favourites are men who traveled in Arab countries in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Sir Richard Burton, in 1853, was the first European to enter Mecca – which today is still forbidden to non-Muslims. He was a swarthy complexion and could speak 43 languages. Whenever he encountered a new language group he would set to work and translate the Gospel of Mark. Not because he was himself religious, he was decidedly not. But because it kept the missionaries happy.



Wilfred Thesiger was the first white man to cross the Empty Quarter in Arabia (1946) - the southern third of the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia, Yemen, UAE, Oman). It is 250,000 square miles of sand and heat; 620 miles long by 320 miles wide. It gets to 50° C in July and August. An unbroken wasteland of dunes 500 feet tall.<sup>ii</sup>





He did this on foot and by camels in the company of Bedouins, who sometimes just refused to go further and sometimes just abandoned him. The greatest danger was Bedouin raiders. But he kept going.

The problem, of course, was water. We turn on our taps and think nothing of it. Well, I do when I'm camping and I have to make 30 gallons last for a few days.

But there in the desert *there isn't any water*, except in tiny oases where it got to the surface from subterranean sources. Thesiger wrote about having to drink water was so foul that even the camels wouldn't drink it. Dead water; stagnant water.

### **In the Text**

Now to our text for the week:

***Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believe in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'*** (John 7:37-38)

There are a few interesting things to observe about our text.

We pick up the story on Jesus' second visit to Jerusalem in chapter 7. The theme of conflict is front and centre. Both in all Judea and Jerusalem, the authorities were ***...looking for opportunities to kill him... Now some of the people of Jerusalem were saying, "Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill?"*** (7:1, 25).

We can't understand this text without understanding the mortal peril which Jesus daily experienced.<sup>iii</sup>

Also, remember that we have been speaking about the water system in the Temple and its symbolic significance in John's gospel. We've talked about the Sheep Pools, and their function in the temple sacrifice of animals, and Jesus' unlikely presence there when he healed a man lame from birth there.

That Sheep Pool incident, which was on his *first visit* to Jerusalem. In his *second visit* Jesus refers to the healing at the pools, saying:

***...I did one miraculous thing a few months ago, and you're still standing around getting all upset, wondering what I'm up to?*** (7:21, 23-24)<sup>iv</sup>

So, the narrative context of Jesus saying is a) the unremitting personal danger he was in and b) the Sheep Pool miracle.<sup>v</sup>

The text says Jesus quoted “scripture”: ***Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.*** But this phrase is not found in the OT.

The phrase “living water” fascinating, is it not? It only occurs three places in the Old Testament and two in the NT, here and in John 4 where Jesus says to the Samaritan woman, ‘you should have asked me, not for well water, but for the *living water*.

Notice the plural... ***“rivers of living water!”***

Notice where it flows out from. First, it is “the one who believes in me.” Where does it get out? The English translation says “heart,” but the Greeks is κοιλιας, *koilias*, “stomach, bowels.” For some reason the ancients saw the bowels as the seat of emotion.

The Message puts it this way... ***Rivers of living water will brim and spill out of the depths of anyone who believes in me...*** I don’t think I can improve on that!

### **From the Text**

What do we learn for life today?

First, we just stand in awe at the evocative power of this phrase as a metaphor for the spiritual vitality that is life in Christ. If you take nothing else away, that is enough, that from your depths your relationship with God is the source of rivers of living water.

That is the obvious thing to be seen. The second take-away is less obvious.

That is, he is saying this in the midst of the industrial-scale cultus of the temple operation. Cultus means a system based on the sacrifice of animals.

In the midst of the sacred precincts, just after referring to his healing at the Sheep Pools, Jesus gives his opponents a timeless piece of advice ***...Don’t be nitpickers, use your head and heart to discern what is right, to test what is authentically right.*** (John 7, *The Message*)

Knowing God isn’t about this. It isn’t about institutions and authorities and hierarchies. It is about ***rivers of living water*** flowing from the depths of our being.

Jesus toggles from the stagnant squalor of the Sheep Pools (where the sacrificed animals are processed), to the **living water** needed in the midst of the institutions.

The application is about how institutions, no matter how well-intentioned, always come to stifle the living waters because of *loyalty to the forms of practice that have long been in place.*

So, we can apply this both personally, and as a local church.

Yes, the words of Jesus are about a *personal experience* of the Holy Spirit. John gives his interpretation of what he thinks Jesus meant in an editorial aside, ***Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive...*** (John 7:39)

The lesson is that stagnation is the worst state of the soul. We don’t pass over this lightly, because sometimes we may well, in fact, feel dead in the water. The gospel here is that this isn’t the end of

it. Our lives are based on the hope of the living water flowing, once again. In a new, continuous process of rebirth from on high.

**But**, Jesus didn't say this to *us*, he said it to those in charge of the institution who were trying to kill him because he healed on the sabbath. That is what the whole of chapter 7 is about – all 52 verses. They saying is about institutional rigidity.

What does this mean for the Christian church? Christianity has survived and thrived for two thousand years in countless different cultures across the globe exactly because it has accommodated itself to culture and reshaped itself to be relevant for the times.

Let me give you an example.

- Greatest Generation: Born before 1946
- Baby Boomers: Born 1946-1968
- Generation X: Born 1968-1980
- Millennials: Born 1981-1996
- Generation Z or iGen: Born 1997–2010 ...
- Generation Alpha: Born Between 2010-2024 ...

For 77 years Baby boomers have been the dominant generation in Canada. That is people born between 1946 and 1968. Statistics Canada said Wednesday that on July 1, 2023 Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, surpassed the baby boomers as the dominant generation in Canada. (sorry Gen X, no dominant for you)

[Musicians Come]

What does this say to us as a religious organization? It says that if we do not adapt our institution to the prevailing culture our institution will fade away.

Our church has been built and run by Boomers. What untold sacrifice and service we have given. Boomers have literally built this church with their own hands and money. The hours of volunteerism could scarcely be tallied.

But here the cultural current of society catches up with us. If the living water gets stopped up in one place, that place dies and it finds another place to flow out.

So that means that we need to hand the reins to the Millennials and let them lead us into the future.

And I'm asking you Millennials to be kind to us and help us adapt slowly. We are going to love it when we experience the living water of your generation. The living water is going to quench our thirst once again. But we can be old fuddy-duddies. I do ask you to be patient with us. Let us sing a hymn every once in a while.

Today we stand before God, thirsty and longing, and may we experience the living water flowing from our hearts and out to everyone we know. Thanks be to God!

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<sup>i</sup> It is possible that Jesus is alluding to an idea in the OT and presenting it in his own words. The phrase “living water” appears in Jeremiah 2:13, 17:13; Zechariah 14:8. And in John 4:10 and 7:38. These all suggest the idea of living water as a metaphor for spiritual vitality. Also, with just “water” as the metaphor:

***With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.*** (Isaiah 12:3)

***For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring.*** (Isaiah 44:3)

***Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!*** (Isaiah 55:1)

<sup>ii</sup> (*Arabian Sands*, 1959). The three largest deserts are the north and south pole, and the Sahara, which is 3,600,000 square miles.

<sup>iii</sup> In chapters 5-12 there is an overarching theme of conflict with “Jews” in general. Behind all of this was the conflict with the Romans and the eventual destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE. Christians fled Jerusalem before the fall of the city and their loyalty to Jesus Christ was condemned by Roman and Jew alike. Christians were *persona non grata* by all. The stakes were high and martyrdom by Rome and Judaism was common. Look at what happened to Jesus. Of the Twelve only two are said to have died a natural death, Matthew and John. Perhaps this is why they produced gospels. All the rest died violently for their faith.

It wasn’t just about the identity of the Messiah, the displacement of the primacy of the law in Jewish life, the radical inclusion of the gentiles in a community of faith – each of these things was a massive challenge to Christian/Jewish relations in John’s day.

Ten of the twelve disciples died in martyrdom. Only John and Matthew lived to an old age, and perhaps this is why they were able to produce gospels.

<sup>iv</sup> A curious feature of this second visit to Jerusalem is that he told his disciples he wasn’t going, and then after they had gone off, went **...as it were in secret...** (v 10). From this we understand that his life was in constant mortal danger.

<sup>v</sup> The narrative pivots on this, the third sign that Jesus did (first was wedding at Cana, the second was the healing of the royal official’s son).

<sup>vi</sup> ὕδατος ζῶντος, *hudotos zdōntos*.