

Trinity 18

I take as my text today the second lesson for Morning Prayer, from the 7th chapter of the Gospel of St. John:

*If any man thirsts, let him come unto Me and drink.
He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said,
out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.*

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

Sometimes, it is good to deviate from the norm and look at the lessons from the Daily Offices, in this instance the New Testament reading from St. John.

One of the amazing things about St. John is that he is a kind of bridge, bridging the first and second centuries and providing mentorship to many such as St. Ignatius of Antioch and St. Polycarp.

It was into John's hands that Jesus, from the Cross, committed the care of his mother. And so it was in the tradition of the Church that she remained in his care until her death.

Tradition also holds that John died in the year 105 and thus he bridged the two centuries.

The words of Jesus recorded by John are not just powerful in themselves but are also significant and bring into focus the role that water has played throughout Church history from the Old to the New Testament — emphasizing how important water is to life itself.

We all know that without water, we cannot survive or live physically. But there is more as we see in this passage from St. John as Jesus declares that he is the giver of *the living water*.

What does this mean? What was Jesus telling us?

First, let's put his words into the context of the occasion.

It would have been in October, the fall of the year, when the Jews were celebrating the Feast of the Tabernacles, a feast which originally lasted seven days but by this age, an eighth day had been added to symbolize the Hebrew Nation's entrance into Canaan.

During the seven days of the feast, water was brought from the Pool of Siloam, mixed with wine, and poured out before the altar in the temple. This was done to recall the gift of water in the wilderness, in particular, when Moses struck the rock from which water flowed.

As water mixed with wine was poured out, Isaiah 12, verse 3 was recited:

Therefore with joy shall ye draw out of the wells of salvation.

However, on the eighth day, water was **not** poured out as the celebration turned to the Hebrew's entrance into Canaan, emphasizing the entering into a land that was indeed a *land of springs of water*.

The Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths, was one of three great feasts whose attendance was compulsory for all adult males who lived within fifteen miles of Jerusalem. The other two compulsory feasts were Passover and Pentecost.

The Feast of Tabernacles fell on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Jewish calendar or roughly October 15th, and had a double significance:

First, an historical significance, symbolized by the setting up of little booths which the people lived in during the Feast. The booths were to be constructed in such a fashion that they would give protection from the weather but would not shut out the sun and would allow the stars to be seen at night through the roof. This was a reminder to the people that once they had been homeless wanderers in the desert, without a roof over their heads. According to Leviticus, its purpose was *that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.*

Second, the Feast had an agricultural significance, in that it was a harvest-thanksgiving festival. It has also been called the Festival of the Ingathering.

According to Leviticus, the people were to bring with them to the feast *the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook*. The Pharisees interpreted this as compulsory, and it led to a vivid ceremony in which the worshippers joyfully participated.

On each of the seven days, the people brought their palm leaves and willow branches, and marched around the great altar, forming a kind of screen, while the priest took a golden pitcher of water from Siloam, mixed with wine, and poured out an offering to God. Psalms were sung, accompanied by flutes. As the ceremony closed each day, the worshippers would shout and wave their palms toward the altar.

Finally, on the last day of the ceremony, the people would march seven times around the altar recollecting the story of Jericho. It was at this moment in the ceremony that Jesus cried out: *If any man thirst, let him come to Me and drink*.

Jesus had come forward to declare himself the giver of the true water, using the symbolic act of the pouring out of the water to turn attention from the physical thirst to the spiritual thirst of mankind.

*He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said,
out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.*

This scriptural quotation from our Lord has never been identified in the Old Testament; perhaps, it was prophetic, in that it is to the New Testament Scripture to come that Jesus is referring; however, while it raises questions, it also has led the way to answers.

The person who accepts Jesus will have within him a river of refreshing water, as our Lord told the Samaritan woman at the well:

*The water that I shall give him will become in him a
spring of water welling up to eternal life.*

There is a parallel saying in Isaiah, Chapter 58, verse 11:

*And the Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy
your desire with good things, and make your bones
strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like
a spring of water, whose waters shall not fail.*

We may ask what it is that Jesus is promising. Could it be that he is promising a cleansing, refreshing, life-giving stream of the Holy Spirit?

As we accept him, he puts into us his Spirit, a new life so that our thoughts and feelings will be purified, revitalized.

St. Paul identified Jesus with the rock from which water flowed in the wilderness. Applied to Jesus, we see him as the life-giving stream, giving us life in the truest sense.

When Jesus died on the Cross, John tells us that when the soldier pierced our Lord's side with the spear, there flowed out water and blood: the water symbolized purification, which comes in Baptism; the blood symbolized the atoning death on the Cross.

Throughout our Sacraments and ritual, we find an emphasis on water: water for Baptism, water mixed with wine for the Holy Eucharist; water for the Asperages, when the people are sprinkled; water for cleansing when one enters a church; water sprinkled upon objects blessed for use in the church or by its members.

Water symbolizes life, both physically and spiritually.

In the book of Joel we find: *And a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord.*

Jesus Christ is that fountain. From him flows the cleansing stream, the water without which mankind can not live and dare not die.