

Down To the River to Pray.... (On The Water of Life.)

A talk by Martin Wroe on 4 September 2022

It would take about 60 minutes on foot.

On a bus we could be there in twenty.

It's one way we tell if we are north or south.

Without it, we wouldn't be here... but we only share it, along with millions of others.

What am I talking about?

The River Thames is London's river. But it's more than that. It's 215 miles long, stretching from its source near Cirencester all the way across England via Oxford and Reading and Maidenhead, before arriving on the edge of London.

From Teddington to Richmond to Kew it snakes down to the Palace of Westminster and then moves on to Greenwich and the Isle of Dogs, out to Dartford and Gravesend where it finally becomes an estuary and heads into the North Sea near Southend.

Most of the time you can't see the Thames from many of the places I just mentioned – you can't see it from around here.

Yet without it, London and all those places, wouldn't be here.

Some things are essential for life even though most of the time we remain blithely unaware of them.

London is here because one day several thousand years ago some ancient Ray Mears type realised that on the banks of this river was an ideal place to set up camp – water to drink and for crops and fish to eat.

Access to water has always been a key to survival. Great cities were founded by rivers from Cairo on the Nile to Jericho on the Jordan, Paris on the Seine, New York on the Hudson.

The name 'London' may be derived from a Celtic word 'Lyndon', which means 'shadowy waters' referring to the Thames.

In the city we don't think of ourselves as river folk or water people – even though we may head to the coast for holidays or Highgate Ponds for a dip.

The quickest way to the water around here is to walk down Caledonian Road or Camden Road until you reach a bridge crossing Regents Canal, then slip off the road and wind along the water for miles.

Follow it to Paddington and you could join the Grand Union Canal: give yourself a few days you could walk along the water for 137miles and reach Birmingham.

In ancient literature much more of life was on the water and it occupied the imagination.

In the opening poem of the poem that we call the Bible, in a time before time was imagined, we find a river flowing from the Garden of Eden.

And with the closing poem, in the Book of Revelation, a time after time has passed, we come back to a river – the river of the water of life flowing from the divine throne.

It's the same river as the one in Eden, providing sustenance for a tree of life which bears good fruit, a tree of life like the one on our chancel roof over there.

A tree of life whose leaves, as it says, quoting that Book of Revelation, 'are for the healing of the nations.'

In the alternative history of faith, in which we find ourselves, life begins with water and ends with water.

And while the waters of the Bible maybe a warning, such as in the Flood, more often water punctuates this sacred history as a blessing and cleansing, a healing balm or a baptism to offer a new start.

But in an age when water is on tap, we rarely give it a second thought.

Few of us have been scarily thirsty - when we couldn't see where the next drink was coming from.

The Bible emerged in a hot country where getting water was the most vital task of the day – for you or for your livestock.

People were thirsty. Water was not on tap. It was deep down a well or a dusty walk away at the river.

Water, like God, was never far from your thoughts ... and not always obviously accessible.

The thought gave rise to a rich simile – the idea of thirst as longing.

‘As the hart panteth after the water brooks,’ says the Psalmist speaking C17th English, ‘So panteth my soul after thee, O God.’

A double simile: the thirst for God like the thirst for water, and the picture of the deer – the hart - tongue hanging out, slurping with relief at the edge of the brook.

Jesus is as thirsty as this out in the country, on a long walk back to Galilee.

The midday sun is burning and he sits down by this well.

It’s not just any well but Jacob’s Well, a legendary source of water, springing deep underground, to which generations had come to wind up the cool clean liquid from the dark depths below.

You can still find it today, in the town of Nablus, in Palestine.

Usually, it was women who came for the water, like this wise Samaritan, a foreign woman in Israel – carrying her bucket to take water back to her family, just as Agnes is carrying her water in Malawi right now, and Grace in Mozambique and Blessings in Uganda.

Just as right now they are balancing water like life on their shoulder or back or head, walking through fields, along dusty roads, taking life in a bucket or carton back to the village, to cook the evening meal or to drink tomorrow morning.

Jesus knows this woman is thirsty.

And she knows Jesus is thirsty.

She is witty and bold and she has an advantage.

She has a bucket and he doesn't.

I imagine she gets him a drink but Jesus has something to offer her too.

As she reels up the water which will keep her children alive, he offers to sate another kind of thirst, one just as deep and desperate as that for water.

I can offer you living water, he says, you'll never be thirsty again.

It will be like your own internal spring he says, a source of divine sustenance bursting with eternal life.

Everyone of us is thirsty.

Is there a connection between the two kinds of thirst, for physical and for spiritual sustenance?

A link between the water we drink and the water that our sisters and brothers in so many countries today cannot drink?

Because it is scarce or contaminated, because thanks to climate-change, it is absent.

Or water that is pouring through your home, your street, your town...in Pakistan this week where the global heating in rich countries like ours has confused the climate and concussed the ancient courses of nature...

.... where rivers break their banks and swallow your town and change your life for ever.

Is there a connection with great British waterways being ruined by negligent water companies, pouring dirty water into rivers and sea?

One connection is found in the story of Henry Whitehead.

In 1854, about a 15minute bus ride from here in the West End, there was an outbreak of disease.

It was inevitable looking back: people lived in overcrowded, squalid conditions with cesspools in the streets and a great overflow of human waste diverted into the River Thames which had become an open sewer.

And London stank.

In August of 1854 127 people near Broad Street – now called Broadwick - died within three days.

Within a week 500 had died. People were terrified and began to flee - cholera stalked every home.

It wasn't surprising that London was so smelly, what with all the human waste – you can find the same in some towns in the poorest countries today.

In the C19th people connected the bad smell with the outbreak of a pandemic.

They thought cholera was a miasma, that it spread through bad air, that if you breathed it you caught it. That was the medical orthodoxy.

But there was a dissenting voice, a man called John Snow, who suspected foul air was not the culprit – he thought it might be to do with the water supply.

Bad water, not bad air. Everybody thought he was nuts.

But John Snow had a hunch that the source of this cholera outbreak was a single public water pump on Broadwick Street.

Unfortunately he couldn't prove anything... until he met someone who knew most people in the area, knew which houses had seen deaths and which had not.

Someone who also knew which routes people took to which water pumps.

More important still, this man was happy to walk around the streets of Soho asking questions and as Snow tried to map the outbreak of the disease.

Which households had lost people, which had not, which pumps people drank from.

This man was the Revd Henry Whitehead, vicar of St Luke's church in Soho and over time he worked with the scientist John Snow to

prove statistically that the Broadwick Street pump was the source of the outbreak.

In other words, between them they changed the prevailing medical orthodoxy – showing that cholera spreads not through air but through water, water which has been contaminated by human waste.

Their work together accelerated both the birth of the science of epidemiology ... and the birth of modern sewage systems.

In time waste was no longer diverted into rivers like the Thames, spreading disease across the country, but kept separate from the water supply and treated in sewage plants. (Sidebar – until recently.)

The Rev Henry Whitehead believed that the route to satisfying our own spiritual thirst lay in relieving the thirst of others, that being part of the Church was inevitably about healing the wounds of our shared world.

Thirst.

Perhaps it's why we are here this morning. Coming to church doesn't add any obvious value to our CV's, doesn't get us points on a course, or kudos with the neighbours.

Maybe it's about thirst – for friendship, for community, for clues about life's journey... for things we might not even have words for.

Communities of faith such as this one are like wells – where we hope to draw sustenance from the dim depths of Christian tradition or the mysterious depths of each others lives.

You cannot bottle it. It is not on tap. You have to go to the well, again and again and again.

Sometimes the bucket will come up empty.

Sometimes a bit murky and dubious – you might need to boil that first.

Sometimes though you will bring up the water of life - as you talk with your neighbours, as you sit and pray, as you sing songs or listen to holy words, as you contemplate the faces of those around you, young and old, lonesome or welcomed, curious or confused.

Sometimes you will taste the living water Jesus talked about, you will sense a living well bursting in your heart, you will feel replenished and ready for the rest of the journey.

Sometimes.

This fragile, provisional, eccentric little church we are part of is a small encampment by a well.

It is a little village nestling on a fine tributary of the great river of faith that runs from the past and meanders into the future.

A river that runs from the distant source in the Garden of Eden, via ancient cultures and strange geographies, via matriarchs and patriarchs, priests and prophets, teachers and healers, winding its strange course through saints and sinners we have never heard of via our parents and mentors, our partners and lovers and friends, our children all the way back to Eden.

All the time providing invisible sustenance for the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

Leaves which deliver clean water, which end disease, leaves which fight climate change and poverty, leaves which sit with those on the margins, in trouble, in distress.

When we come down to this river to pray, we do not come for self-help.

We come to see if we can be of help to others and in this place is where we will find our own healing.

In solidarity with the lives of others, we find spiritual sustenance ourselves, we drink from the water of life.

This is what Isaiah, a prophet standing by this great river of faith, three thousand years ago, realised.

He put it like this:

*'If you... spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.*

*The Lord will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.....'*