

## **Sermon, 17 July 2016**

Given this year's disappointing summer, it is hard to believe that a few years back we were experiencing periods of drought and warnings that our ponds, rivers and springs may dry up. Such moments in this rather wet country of ours are rare, but in Israel where Jesus preached, as elsewhere in the Middle East, they are all too common, and water is a precious and treasured resource.

For those in such places, its scarcity is not just an inconvenience but also a threat to life itself. We all have the images in our minds of women and children in Africa or Asia who have to walk dozens of miles to reach a pond of water that keeps them alive. Often however the water is so polluted and dirty that its consumption is life threatening. Global warming has further increased the threat for many families. Desertification leaves many people without water, the most essential source of life. Where clear water is rare and precious, every spring, oasis or well is accorded almost sacred status.

Other than the people living in the desert, we take water for granted. We only have to open the tap and clean and affordable water pours out resourced from the lakes and rivers in our countries. We are blessed with rain, although we might not always see the wet weather as a blessing.

It is impossible to survive without water, and millions of people die from thirst. International organisations call for the recognition of natural disaster caused by climate change as a reason to seek asylum. In 2010, the United Nations General Assembly recognised the human right to water and sanitation and acknowledged that clean drinking water and sanitation are essential to the realisation of all human rights. It states that "the human right to water is indispensable for leading a life in human dignity. It is a prerequisite for the realisation of other human rights".

But the multinational concern Nestle challenged this presumption and denied that water is a fundamental human right. Nestle developed ways of purposefully deprive local communities of potable piped water to create a water shortage, and hence established a lucrative business. By denying people

access to clean and affordable water, multinational concerns and corrupt governments threaten the lives of thousands of people in the poorest and most deprived areas on our planet. They are simply cut off the springs of living water so essential for survival.

It is in this context of dried land in which Jesus promised a stream of living water to anyone who is thirsty. He chose to make his pronouncement by the occasion of the Feast of Tabernacles – a day on which the Jews remembered God’s provision of water from a rock during Israel’s time in the desert. The highlight of events was a ceremonial pouring out of water as a symbol of that time when despair was turned to hope, doubt to faith and almost certain death to a celebration of life.

In this rainy country, we do not have to thirst for water. We do not have to walk miles and miles to get to a well or a pond to survive. And yet, we are thirsty. The well of living water that Jesus refers to is not just a source of drinking water. It is also as a source of spiritual water.

I recently met a man who had lost his son and his brother, both within a year. The man was broken and he said to me that he had thought about ending his own life. I asked him what hindered him from doing it. He first answered that he was just too cowardly. But then he added that he had a daughter, and that it was the thought of his daughter that kept him going. That man’s thirst for life had almost vanished, and some people indeed give up because they can’t see the source of life anymore. Yet in this man there was that little bit of thirst left triggered by a person he truly cared about and loved.

Sometimes we feel very close to the source of living water and we have a plentiful supply. Sometimes we feel far away from the well and we have to fight our way to it to catch a few drops that keep us going.

In the Book of Revelation it is described that a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language stood before God’s throne. Angels were standing there and all the living creatures, and one of the elders said: never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst. Their shepherd will lead

them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eye.

The well of living water is among us and all around us, often closer than we think. All people, no matter what religion, are united in their thirst for water that brings life and power and strength. We live in the hope that one day our thirst for justice and peace will be stilled, and until then we shall continue to thirst and to seek for the well that gives life.

Amen