

SERMON 26 AUGUST 2018

Last Tuesday I got a shuttle bus from Dunedin to the airport. I always like landing there and the journey to and from the airport as, in complete contrast to Sydney, one is surrounded by low green hills, cows grazing and grass up to their ankles (if cows have ankles) and the river meandering along. The cows are obviously used to the planes as they seem to take no notice, not that it is a hugely busy airport. I came back to Sydney, to New South Wales, to this state that is 100% in drought and where there are no really lush green paddocks or cows ankle deep in grass, at least unless there is lots of water for irrigation. And we are all, I hope, very aware of the plight of farmers and their livestock and their crops inland from the Eastern fringe. Water. The fundamental of life. The human body is 60% water. Our brains and hearts are made up of 73% water and our lungs 83%. Without water we shrivel up and die, far more quickly than we do without food. In Australia if you want to go driving into the outback you have to make sure you take plenty of water in big containers. Yet, in the city, we still turn on our taps and expect that copious water will flow, for all our showers, our washing machines, our dishwashers, our gardens, and keeping our cars clean. Though please don't look at mine.

We associate abundant life with streams of water as they rush over rocks and waterfalls and slow down into slow moving pools. We can imagine the growth around the banks and the myriad life forms that swim, creep and fly, some so small they can only be seen a microscope; some that leave footprints along the muddy edges. All things bright and beautiful.

Water conjures up so many images. It also brings to kind terrible power and devastating floods and mudslides. It has made hundreds of

thousands homeless in the last fortnight. Water thunders down cliffs and mountainsides; it drives electricity and brings light, heat, cooling and power to millions of people.

This morning we have witnessed a different image of water as Bobby was baptised. There used to be an idea that all babies were born into some original sin, that humankind is basically evil. That seems to us now to be such a flawed and terrible notion, one itself born out of the struggle to understand why there is a dark side to life, why there is evil. If you have witnessed the miracle of birth, what you see is a new beginning, something indescribably wonderful and full of hope, though we know also that sometimes, heartbreakingly, things can go wrong as well. And then we know that something is wrong, that that is not how things are meant to be. Baptism used to be thought to be necessary to guard against this original sin and make sure that the baby would be safe with God whatever happened. Today we have not poured water over Bobby's head to wash anything away but as a symbol of bringing him into something more – the extraordinary love-enfolding life of Christ in his self-giving life, his death and his resurrection; his defeat of darkness. Bobby has been baptised into the way of Christ and into the community of the world-wide church of which we, here, are a little part. Baptism is, therefore a statement of hope, of faith, of love, of trust; of belief, not in doctrines, but in God who is always more than we can imagine or get our heads around.

We have imagined water this morning. How much we need to go on imagining what is good these days. There is so much around us that can fill us with despair, that can make us feel powerless as we see how people nowadays seem to accept language and behaviours across society that demean, that invoke fear and anger, that separate person from person,

group from group, country from country. These streams are inhuman. They are dried up. The ground around them is parched and lifeless. We need to stop and reflect on what it is that feeds out imaginations with goodness, with creativity and wonder and all that indicates life and liveliness? There are so many things, and, surely, they are all rooted and grounded in truth, in wisdom, in integrity, in love. These carry the flow of life, the streams of living water that renew us and refresh our souls. And don't we all, deep down, long for that?

There was a woman who hid away in shame, whose knew all about loneliness and who had tried to fill that void in ways that only made her feel worse. She knew she was ostracised by her neighbours, so she avoided them. There seemed to be no escape from this, no way to change things. So, she went out in the heat of the day when no-one else was around to get the water she needed. Her life was completely changed that day because she met Jesus. He knew her, he knew her struggles. He didn't judge her. He offered her living water because he knew how parched her soul was. Maybe she didn't realise quite how parched she was until then. But everything changed for her. The living water was not water from the well, but the stream that flowed from love and compassion and brought healing, wholeness and hope.

"I am the living water" said Jesus. This water doesn't depend on rainfall. It wells up from within when we know that we are loved, understood and accompanied on our way. This water may not end our physical drought, but it can bring us together as people who reach out in compassion to one another and to the earth whose systems have been so abused. This water can enliven us as communities of faith and of belief that we are all called to something more than the mundane routines which become our habit.

Jesus said, “Whoever drinks the water I give them will never be thirsty again. Indeed, the water I give will be a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” Imagine that! That is what we are meant to do – to imagine that, and let our imaginations lead us to new beginnings.

Bobby is part of this flow of life that finds refreshment together in the grace of God, made known to us in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, into whose current of love he was baptised today. May we all drink from that well that never dries and find our parched souls are filled and renewed.