

'Water, water, everywhere...'

Sermon for Creationtide 4: The Gift of Water

by Mark Pilgrim

Where would we be without water? Absolutely nowhere. Without water, life as we know it would never have evolved on Earth. Without water and the combination of hydrogen and oxygen that it contains, the interaction between water and under-sea volcanic eruptions would never have produced the building blocks of life. Without water, water dwelling creatures would never have emerged onto land to become the diverse, rich forms of life that eventually produced primates and human beings. Without rainwater, losing salt as moisture rises to forms clouds falling then as pure H₂O onto the land, no land-dwelling creature can survive. Water is truly a gift: a gift from God, the Creator of the Universe of all that is and will be – a gift to place alongside all the other elements, including carbon, potassium and the rest which constitute not only our world but also everything else in the universe – including the mysterious Black Holes that keep scientists guessing and exploring even as people of prayer wonder about and pray to the God whom we see behind it all...the God whom Christians believe has shared our life in the person of Jesus Christ and who continues to share our life, leading and guiding us through the Holy Spirit.

So, on this fourth Sunday of Creationtide, we are invited not only to treasure the gift of water but also to commit to steward its presence on Earth more wisely. The documentaries of David Attenborough over the years have taken us to the furthest depths of the ocean, to the icy environments of polar regions, to lush rain forests where Attenborough has himself gambolled with mountain gorillas and to harsh deserts where the ability of creatures to survive for long periods without water has been something to marvel about too. Taking more care with how we relate to water – as global warming melts the ice pack on which polar bears depend, as our use of plastics contaminates the deepest oceans with micro particles that threaten to cut off and alter vital parts of the food chain of which all life is a part – how we relate, now and in the years ahead, to God's gift of water is a fundamental task for us to attend to now and for all time ahead.

But there's a problem. We are fallible. We get distracted. Things crop up and demand our attention so that we take our eye off the ball and get involved in other concerns. None more so, just as 2020 seemed to be the year when responding to the climate crisis was something millions of people round the world were beginning to do, than now, when the whole world is hit by Covid 19.

How are we to move forward? How are we to balance the competing demands of health security and climate crisis, especially when, for instance, with the demands of health protection, use of disposable but highly polluting plastics will have shot up a huge amount? It's a conundrum (it's tempting to lay at the feet of politicians for sorting, but, in truth, isn't it a challenge) we are all facing.

Those of us who gather by phone and iPad for Morning Prayer at 9.15 on weekday mornings have been both sharing and attempting to respond to the sense of despair which we and others are currently feeling – and which is almost bound to be felt more widely and deeply in the time ahead. During this time, the Christian message remains constant. God is with us in this tribulation. God's light is shining in the world and, despite the depth of darkness, the darkness will never overcome it. What we say in the Eucharistic Prayer later in this service encapsulates the whole tradition and our belief: 'Jesus Christ has died. Jesus Christ is risen. Jesus Christ will come again.' If you are looking for some support and solace for yourself and others around you, then I suggest turning to the Psalms. Psalm 31 that we read at Morning Prayer on Friday or Psalm 40 a bit further on are full of phrases that resonate with our current situation. And if you want to marry the Psalms with today's theme of water, there are 47 references to 'water' in them, some of them relating to fear and destruction, others of them relating to cleansing and healing. Have a look and share what you find.

I am delighted to report two positive developments that have been part of my world in the last 48 hours. The first is the publication of Stephen Cottrell, the new Archbishop of York's address to a special meeting of General Synod on Thursday. His opening words are 'I hate this Coronavirus' – and he goes on to explore both the difficulties and the opportunities the virus has brought us. Here he includes opportunities seriously to pause and change the way we relate to God's gift of water and other resources in the environment and to God's gift of human diversity, brought to our attention through Black Lives Matter. In his address Stephen moves from what he hates to what he gives thanks for and then to what he yearns for. It ends with a ringing invitation to not only General Synod but, by extension, the whole of the Church of England and the wider Christian community to cry out with him words Paul wrote long ago in his letter to the Romans 'Death, where is your sting? Grave, where is your victory? For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' I am arranging for everyone attending St Peter's to be able to read this clarion call for themselves in the next few days.

The second development I am going to share with you relates directly to the gift of water.

At the beginning of August we had a request through our website email from a couple wanting their baby baptised. Because there seemed no prospect of having the baptism as part of a day time Sunday service, we arranged for the baptism to take place at 11am next Saturday morning, 3rd October. Everything was going ahead: Kandis and I have met the couple – Nicola who was brought up in Henleaze and remembers Pat Fulwood from the Brownies and her husband Tom, originally from Leicestershire. Their party of 30 socially distancing people could be easily accommodated in our main church area. Then, last Thursday, came some difficult news through an email update from the Diocese. As from now, stand-alone baptisms came within the Rule of Six. Baptisms that were part of a regular act of worship could take place with as many people socially distancing as the premises allowed. This baptism could only take place on the Saturday morning with the parents, baby daughter Frankie, myself and a maximum of two people (e.g. two but not all the godparents?) present. What did Nicola and Tom want to do? Go ahead with six or less people there. Postpone the baptism until the health situation changed. Bring the baptism into a regular act of worship in church (8am in the morning or 7.30pm at night). None of these possibilities could be said to be very inviting. I put them to Tom and Nicola and this was the response that came back: 'The main thing from our perspective is to welcome her into the Christian faith. It'll be Nicola, myself and Frankie.' They were prepared to leave everyone out – including godparents – in order to usher Frankie into Christian faith and community through the waters of baptism.

Then it occurred to me that we have just acquired the ability to broadcast our 10am service from church. Our regular 10am Communion could, on 4th October and thereafter, be both in church and on Zoom. I put the possibility of Frankie being baptised in the course of a Communion service with godparents and other family and friends present and they were delighted. We now have 18 people expected at our 4th October 10am service already. They will attend in 6 socially distanced groups. There will be room for about the same number of socially distanced groups to come from St Peter's regular attenders. Applications to do this are invited from now and will be included in the email probably being sent out on Tuesday. Phone applications will be possible too. It will be especially heartening, no doubt, if the Hallam family and friends see St Peter's being attended by families like themselves!

Now, as we focus on God's gift of water and are reminded of both the positive and negative associations water has with Creationtide, let us move forward together in faith, firmly committed to treasure God's world and love all God's people. Please pray, this week, for Frankie Grace Hallam and her parents Tom and Nicola of Dorset Road as they look forward to Frankie's baptism in the water of life next week and as we hear Jesus speak in our Gospel this morning once again: 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.' Amen.