

Both of our readings today were about water. Water features quite prominently in our scriptures – both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Now, given that we can't live for more than a day or two without water, and that our scriptures all originated in a place where the water supply can be unpredictable, that makes sense.

What's a little less obvious, however, is that our scriptures, and our liturgies, put a lot of emphasis on "living water." What exactly is "living water"? Is there such a thing as "dead water"? What makes "living water" different?

For the Jews, at the time of Jesus, there was a very clear answer to that: "living water" had to be flowing from a natural source – a stream or a spring. Water that had been collected in a tank or a cistern was stagnant. The distinction was important, because Jewish purification rites were absolutely compulsory and could only be performed with "living water."

Now, you only have to think about that for a few minutes to see how tricky that distinction is. If you have to carry water from the 'living' source in a container, is it no longer 'living', or is there a time limit? If you get water from a well, as I do, and there are two tanks between the tap and the underground stream, is that water still 'living' or do I have to empty the tanks first?

To avoid getting into that kind of nit-picking, the Jews interpreted the term very loosely. We avoid the question by thinking of "living water" as a metaphor for the flowing of the spirit in the world. But before we wander off into metaphor, it's worth taking just a moment to reflect on just why water is so significant.

Nothing on this planet would be "living" at all without it. Water **IS** life. We ourselves are mostly composed of water. Take the water out of our bodies and all you have left is a pile of dust. If we don't keep topping ourselves up with water, all day every day, we die. Water IS life.

But this vital substance, which is so commonplace and universal, is also very powerful and unpredictable. Immerse just the bottom half of our faces in it for a few minutes, and we die. Too little water will kill us, but too much water will kill us a lot faster. And although we might like to think that we have water under our control, we definitely do NOT.

In our neck of the woods, we tend to take water for granted. Even if we have a well we hardly give it a second thought, until the pump breaks, or we forget about the sprinkler and the well runs dry, or the power goes out. And then we still have water; we just miss *convenient* water.

We are SO much better off than most of the world. We have an abundance of clean, fresh water, in a world where millions of people don't, and thousands die every day from diseases carried in dirty water. People who don't have enough water to drink don't have enough water to keep themselves and their surroundings clean, and that's another danger to life, as well as human dignity. We need clean water inside and outside our bodies to maintain health. And we need cleanliness and health to maintain our self-respect.

Where there is water, there can be food crops; there can be livestock, milk and meat; you can keep things clean and fight diseases; you can make bricks to build houses; you can produce crops to sell and create an economy. Where there is enough water, life will thrive and flourish.

Survival, health and well-being depend on water, but its therapeutic value doesn't end there. Where do we most like to spend our leisure time? At the beach. In the pool. Playing with water; listening to the sound of it; watching how it sparkles in a waterfall, rolls onto the sand, or sprays from a fountain. When we feel achy, we soak in a nice hot bath. When we feel groggy, we take a nice brisk shower. Even if you had just been saved from a flood, the first thing you'd probably want would be a nice hot shower! Water soothes our bodies and our souls. It gives us life, food, refreshment, dignity and well-being, as long as there is enough of it in the right places, and not too of it much in the wrong places!

No wonder pagan peoples thought it was important to keep the water gods happy. We aren't pagans: we don't worship water gods. We are a sacramental people, and our sacraments reflect the universal, life-giving, invisible grace of the Holy Spirit. We use the metaphor of water to describe the stream of grace, but we also use actual water in our Christian sacraments. Our very first sacrament is baptism. Immersion in water. It might be a symbolic sprinkle on the forehead, or a complete dunking, but you can't do it without water.

And water is a constant thread in our scriptures: from wells and springs that save people from death, to floods that threaten to kill them, to Jesus being baptized in the river, walking on the water, and meeting strangers at a well. Old and New Testament stories often happen by the sea, at the river or around wells, where life is sustained.

A creature on Star Trek once described human as "great big ugly sacks of mostly water." But we are much more than that. Beyond our physical needs, we have spirits that need to be fed and nurtured as well. No wonder, then, that we choose water as a metaphor for the action of the Spirit in the world. No wonder our scriptures and hymns talk about God's love being a river, a fountain, a spring. Just as literal water sustains physical life, so metaphorical water, the living water of the spirit, sustains our spiritual life.

As people of God, we are called to share that living water with the world, to show others its life-giving properties. And just as our physical being won't survive if it's not frequently topped up with water, so our spiritual being needs to be topped up regularly as well, with the living water that flows constantly from the renewable source. We all know how to do that – we wouldn't be here together otherwise! Gathering together reminds us, and so does the quiet time that we spend alone, in our own thoughts and prayers. This morning's gathering prayer puts it beautifully:

Dear Father, quieten our minds and still our hearts as we seek your living presence. Strengthen our lives and inspire our spirits, for your living waters flow with endless grace. Amen.