

## SPIRIT DRINKERS

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 15th May 2005

### **Theme**

Jesus offers us his Spirit to quench our thirst in a dry and thirsty world.

### **Introduction**

There are many things one can say about the Spirit – obviously, for any time we speak about God, it is not an exhaustible subject – and there are many things one can say about Pentecost Sunday.

I have confined myself today to two things – one point as a way of introduction and linking up with what I said last Sunday, and one point as a means, hopefully, of encouraging all of us consciously to draw close to God who quenches our thirst.

Last week I touched on an issue that causes discomfort for some Christians in our present-day circumstances, that is the exclusive claims made by Jesus. Or at least the discomfort caused because it is perceived that those claims have sometimes been used in unhelpful ways by followers of Jesus. I said that it causes some Christians to have “a high cringe factor”. And after talking it through, based on an understanding of what John was saying in his Gospel message, I concluded that whilst we need have no enmity towards those of other faiths or those of no faith, we who are followers of Christ need have NO sense of cringe in following Jesus, the way, the truth and the life.

In thinking this week on Pentecost, it struck me that one of the effects of the Spirit being given to the church in this new way, as celebrated at Pentecost, is a boldness about the things of God.

Boldness. Neither arrogance, nor something used to bludgeon people who do not see life the way I do, but boldness in relationship to God and declaring the good news of God in Christ to a thirsty world.

If there were more time, I would have loved to amplify the theme of dryness and thirst even more than I am going to. If this were primarily an evangelistic address, to an audience who did not know about God in Jesus Christ and were not committed to following God, I think I might draw that theme out even more.

But then there is always an evangelistic thrust, even in this pulpit – for two reasons: We are in a process of continual conversion of life, being shaped and conformed to God’s intentions for us; and, there may always be some here who are not yet sure of commitment to God in Christ.

Yet, I have made a presumption (correctly, one obviously hopes), that people who come here to worship do so because of commitment of their lives to God and also because they

are aware of their need of God – their own thirst – as well as being aware of the world’s need for God.

Desert and drought are not exactly the stuff for which Hilton is known! Having 400mm of rain in each of January and February this here hardly qualifies for that. Yet we know the effects of water shortage. Even my family and I were amongst hundreds of people who went to check out the beautiful sight of water cascading in beautiful patterns over the newly raised Midmar Dam wall a few months ago. It made newspaper headlines, not only as a lovely sight, but because it also meant worries about water rationing, threatened late last year, are over for a long time.

Many of us have had to worry about taking water with us on a hike or camping trip. And only 200km north of us, we see devastation as lakes dry up, hippos have no water left, distressed farmers leave their lands and already poor people have their poverty exacerbated as crops fail and cattle die in their thousands – all for lack of water!

And that’s only referring to physical thirst – essential water for living! What about on a spiritual level? People seek (and often do not find)...

- ◆ Happiness
- ◆ Joy
- ◆ Peace and fulfilment in life
- ◆ Stable relationships, meaningful family life
- ◆ Justice
- ◆ Deep security
- ◆ And a sense of knowing God
- ◆ AND of being known BY God!

In Luke’s account of that day of Pentecost in his book, the Acts of the Apostles, he reports that when the Spirit was poured out, the impression created to many outsiders was that the followers of Jesus were drunk!

Further, it is clear from Luke’s writings in the book of Acts and also from the writings of Paul, that the Holy Spirit is a giver of spectacular gifts – gifts that more reserved people may feel go way beyond what they are comfortable with. Hence some “shut out” talk of the Holy Spirit.

But in the gospel of John, whilst the Holy Spirit is depicted in less spectacular terms, she is depicted in ways that make it obvious we’d be lost without her. Perhaps best known of John’s images of the Spirit are the passages in chapters 14 to 16, where the Greek word “paraclete” is used.

Incidentally, in preparing my sermon I was reminded of something I had long since forgotten: in the original languages in which the Bible was written, it is the only masculine word used for the Spirit, so if you’re wondering why I refer to the Spirit as

“she”, it is because apart from these few verses, the Spirit is “she” or “it” throughout the Bible.

Older English language versions usually translated everything in the masculine form, even when the original Greek in which it was written had quite distinct terms that were either masculine or feminine or even gender-neutral. A well-known example is when the Greek word for people or humanity was translated into English as man or mankind, giving a different sense to what was originally used. For some, this kind of thing is entirely irrelevant (if so, ignore it); for others, it is important, hence my brief mention of it. But I digress...

... The word “paraclete” has no single exact English equivalent; it is so rich with meaning that it has been translated as Advocate, Comforter, or Counsellor. The Spirit is depicted as the one who will be there for us when the going gets tough. She will back us up, support us, encourage us, and even speak up for us or intervene on our behalf. Jesus speaks of the Spirit in these terms at a time when his followers are anxious about the future, and here he reassures them.

Looking further at John’s gospel, we find a deep interest in the question of what spirit we are drinking and where the spirit comes from. John writes of the Holy Spirit as one that is like an essential ingredient to life: Water to drink. “If you have a thirst that won’t go away, come to me and drink,” says Jesus. “I have rivers of life-giving water welling up from deep within,” and John adds an explanatory note to tell us that he was referring to the Holy Spirit who would soon be given to those who put their trust in Jesus.

The context in which Jesus said this made it especially powerful. We are told it was on the big final day of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. Like all the Jewish religious festivals, this Feast was about remembering what God had done for the people in the past – and reliving the meaning of those events for the present. One of the main associations of this feast was remembering how God had sustained and provided for the people when they were homeless wanderers in the desert.

As anyone wandering in the desert will tell you, the number one essential for life is water to drink. And one of the stories retold during this festival was the story of the day when the people were almost dying of thirst and God provided water that gushed from a rock when Moses struck it with his stick. Everyday during the feast, there would be a procession from the Temple to the Pool of Siloam. The priests would fill a pitcher with water from the pool and then the procession would return singing joyously to the Temple. The priest would process around the altar carrying the water and then pour it out as an offering to God. Songs would be sung, speaking of drawing water with joy from the well of God’s salvation.

So when Jesus announces at the climax of the festival that he is the one from within whom rivers of life-giving water flow to quench the thirst of the faithful, he is identifying himself with the Rock through which God saves and gives life to the people. That might

not sound that earth-shattering to us, but in that context it was a bombshell that ignited a storm of controversy.

In the context of our own society, it is still a radical and confronting claim. Perhaps the association with thirst is our way into it. If you are thirsty enough, you'll drink anything, and I think Jesus is challenging us to think about what spirit we are going to drink and where it comes from. The image of thirsty people searching for a drink in a barren place is a powerful picture of people searching for something pure and trustworthy to live by. You don't have to look far to begin seeing that thirst being exploited by those willing to cash in on it. Everyone with a message, a service or a product to sell will tell you how if you take what they are offering you will find it satisfying deep needs within you.

Some will invite you to drink deeply from the well of financial security. Invest in high-yielding stocks, and set yourself up for life, and your deepest thirsts will be satisfied, they promise. But the well is poisoned. Many have drunk deeply of the spirit that flows there, and come away crippled by anxiety and greed and with their relationships reduced to marketing opportunities.

Some will invite you to drink deeply from the well of social success. Get the right job, be seen in the right places, climb social ladders, and your deepest thirsts will be satisfied, they promise. But the well is polluted. Many have drunk deeply of the spirit that flows there, and come away poisoned by superficiality and competitiveness and by the fear that it can never last.

Some will invite you to drink deeply from the well of "protectionism". Horde all your resources for your own enjoyment, insulate yourselves from the needs of others lest they cost you, and your deepest thirsts will be satisfied, they promise. But many are drinking deeply of the spirit that flows there, and being poisoned by it. Everything they once enjoyed becomes something to be jealously protected and everyone with a need becomes a threat to our rights and our lifestyle, and we find that we have isolated ourselves from everyone and we are shrivelled and loveless.

Come to me, all who are thirsty, and drink deep, says Jesus. And here, where we gather to drink deeply of the Spirit that flows from Jesus, we find a Spirit that flows from self-sacrificing love.

Here as we see bread broken and wine poured, as we are reminded of one who hung on a cross and from whose pierced side water and blood flowed, we know we are being offered a very different kind of spirit.

Here we drink of a Spirit that is poured out for the common good, a spirit that binds us together as one body, so that we may in turn be broken and poured out for the common good.

Here we drink of a Spirit that flows like life-giving water, so that we might in turn be springs of life-giving water, for it is in this Spirit of self-sacrificing love that flows from Christ, that our deepest thirst is satisfied.

Come, Holy Spirit, come.