

Living Water and Sweet Wine

In the name of him who has breathed out upon us his Spirit, dear friends in Christ: I grew up on the west coast where weather patterns are very different than they are around here. Out there almost all of the rain comes in the form of these huge Pacific fronts that come in off of the ocean heading eastward. And because of the mountain ranges, the Sierra Nevada, the Cascades, and to some extent the Coast Ranges, which cause the oncoming moist air to rise and therefore cool, what happens is that the moisture in the air condenses and falls out – falls out in the form of rain or snow to the west side of the mountains, but not so much to the east. So, if you're standing on a mountain peak the contrast is very sharp. To the west you'll see green forests and orchards full of life, and to the east you'll see brown, dead deserts. Well, not entirely dead deserts. A little moisture does make it over the mountains. There's a little bit of water even in the desert; it's just a lot harder to come by. But still, the contrast between one side and the other makes it evident that water is life.

Now, it happens that the geography and weather patterns of Israel are almost identical to those of southern California. And it's precisely this contrast between the well watered west and the desert east that will help us understand what Jesus is saying in today's Gospel.

It's the final day of the Feast of Tabernacles. This was a weeklong festival that celebrated the Lord's gracious provision for his people when they were led by Moses through the desert those forty years they spent out there before entering the Promised Land. In observing this festival, the Lord commanded his people to relive some of the events and circumstances of that time. So they had to move out of their comfortable homes and live in makeshift shelters, sleep on the ground, and eat very simple food. It was to give them a taste of what their ancestors had endured so many years before. It was also to heighten their appreciation for the Lord's constant care for his people in the desert and even more for his bringing them at last into their well watered land flowing with milk and honey.

Throughout the week there were any number of ceremonies and traditions that commemorated events that took place in the desert, but the most important was the final and climactic one mentioned in today's text. This rite centered on the altar that stood before the Lord's Temple. That's the altar on which the blood of the sacrificial animals was poured out and burned to make atonement for sins. If I could put a sign on that altar, it would say "God's forgiveness happens here". Hold that thought in your head while I add another layer of significance to this final ceremony of the festival. The event it commemorated was that time when the Israelites camped in a place where there was no water and they complained bitterly that the Lord had brought them out into the desert only to kill them of thirst. In response, Lord directed Moses to strike the Rock at Horeb which was near the camp. When he did, a spring of water gushed forth from the rock and God's people were saved. That water was their life.

Okay, now mentally substitute the altar for that rock. That's the role the altar played in the final ceremony. Seven priests carrying golden pitchers of water led a crowd of joyful celebrants in a procession round and round the altar, everyone singing psalms of praise. Then, at the end, the priests approached the altar and poured the contents of their pitchers into funnel-like depressions on its top. The crowd would become absolutely silent while the water percolated through the altar for a minute or so, and then, when a stream of water appeared flowing from its base the crowd erupted with shouts of joy – again, remembering how the Lord provided life-giving water from the rock in the desert.

Hopefully you see how the two concepts overlap: our lives depend on water *and* our lives depend on God's forgiveness. Without either one we can't live. And God's forgiveness depends on sacrifice; that is, something (representing a specific *Someone*) who dies in our place. Recall too that there is a tight scriptural connection between Christ and the Rock at Horeb. I preached on it in one of the Lenten evening services this spring. The short version is this: The people will die without water. Moses, representing the Law of God that demands death for sinners, strikes the Rock which stands for Christ. When he does, that is, when Christ dies under the Law, the water of God's life-giving forgiveness flows out from him.

Got all that? Now put it together: the priests with their pitchers are leading the procession of singing celebrants around the altar. They step forward and begin to pour. A hush falls over the crowd. All eyes are fixed on the foot of the altar anticipating that moment when the water will appear. And that's when Jesus cries out at the top of his voice, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink! Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water!'"

All eyes turn as one. Everyone wants to know who it is that's disrupting this sacred moment of silence by shouting about himself. They see Jesus standing alone, apart from the crowd – which is exactly what he wants them to see. He's redirecting their focus from the picture, the types and shadows being enacted in the ceremony, to the real thing. He's effectively telling them "All that over there is about *me!* *I am* the sacrifice of atonement. *I am* the one the Law of God shall strike. And when it does, from *me* will flow rivers of living water."

And the evangelist John adds this editorial comment: "[Jesus] said this about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."

We need to understand this. There is something qualitatively different about the way the Holy Spirit was present in the world before Jesus' glorification – by which we mean his death, resurrection, and ascension – and ever since it took place. Now, Scripture is clear about this: no one believes the truth about Jesus and his Gospel without the Spirit. The Holy Spirit works saving faith in the heart of believers by the Word. And obviously there were true believers in the world before Jesus' glorification, all the Old Testament saints among them. So the Spirit must have been at work in them. To be sure, we read time and again that the Spirit came upon this person or that, enabling them to prophesy or perform other superhuman feats. But still, there was something lacking. The fullness of the Spirit's presence could not be felt until after Jesus made atonement for sin. The temple of the human heart had to be cleansed by the blood of Jesus before the Spirit could take up complete occupancy there.

Therefore in the words of Jesus describing the Spirit as the living water that flows from him, the Old Testament times were like a desert. The Spirit was there doing his thing, but awfully hard to come by. And this is borne out by the comparatively small number of true believers there were in the world back then. I mean in the grand scale of the world's population, Israel was very a tiny country with relatively few people, and Lord knows that the majority of them weren't faithful most of the time. The world truly was a spiritual desert.

But not anymore. In the New Testament era, we're living on the west side of the mountains. And we see the opening of the flood gates in today's reading from Acts that tells of that first post-glorification Pentecost and the raining down of the Spirit in full measure. Jerusalem is full of people from all over the Mediterranean world, Jews living in the Diaspora and Gentile proselytes to the faith. They've come as pilgrims for the religious festival. At the

sound of the Spirit's arrival, many of them rush together to see what's going on. And they are amazed to discover that the center of attention is a handful of Galilean fishermen who are preaching about Jesus as the Christ fluently in their native tongues.

We know that some 3000 of them were baptized that day alone. The Holy Spirit filled them too and gave them the gift of saving faith. And after the festival, they went home and took the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit with them. The number of true believers grew exponentially. The living water of the Spirit was flowing like a mighty river. And it still is today wherever the Gospel of Jesus is being proclaimed in its truth and purity. So, let the water flow, that glorious fountain that pours forth from the Savior's side.

Or maybe something else. There's another metaphor for the Spirit that shows up in today's reading from Acts that's worth mentioning. It happens when the crowd comes together and hears the apostles speaking in different languages. To some, the mockers, it sounds like gobbledegook. They dismiss the apostles as being a bunch of wild rambling drunks. "They are filled with new wine", we heard them say. But unfortunately, that's a bad translation. What the text actually says is "They are filled with *sweet* wine".

It would seem that those who did the translation didn't know much about winemaking. You see, there is a product called new wine. It's grape juice that is only partially fermented, so it still has a lot of sugar that hasn't been converted into alcohol. It's rather sweet and fizzy. The trouble is that it's only available for a short period around the time of the grape harvest, which is in the late summer and fall. But Pentecost happens in the spring. There's no new wine around.

What is available is sweet wine. It's wine made from the grapes picked very late in the season. And the later you pick a grape, the less water and more sugar there will be in it. When you make wine from such grapes, there will be quite a bit of sugar left even after the ferment is complete. Such wine was highly prized in the ancient world (and it still is). It's the good stuff.

And that calls to mind the first miracle of Jesus in which he changed water to wine. And not just any wine. He made the good stuff. What they were drinking before Jesus' gift was lacking – just like the Spirit's presence in the world before Jesus' glorification. So, properly understood, what the mockers say of the apostles is true in a sense: they are full of sweet wine, the sweet wine of the Spirit, the good stuff.

May Jesus in his mercy also fill all of us to overflowing with the living water and the sweet wine of his Holy Spirit. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!