

Rivers of Life

Ezekiel 47.1-9 & John 7.37-39

If you type ‘Australian rivers’ into an internet browser, one of the first things to appear is a series of riverscapes. Pictures of wide, winding waterways flowing slowly through agricultural land; and of fresh Alpine streams splashing over moss-green granite; and great northern rivers set in red rock gorges; and dry-sandy creek beds lined with river gums and gnarly old coolabahs – their water flowing underground. You’ll also see a shot of Australia’s longest river, the mighty *Murray*; and of its longest tributary, the *Murrumbidgee*. You’ll see rivers snaking through state capitals – the *Brisbane*, *Yarra*, *Swan*, *Derwent*, *Torrens*; and rivers meandering through Australia’s vast central basin – the famous *Finke* (oldest riverbed in the world); the *Gascoyne*; *Coopers Creek*. More locally, there’s the *Eucumbene*, the *Tumut*, the famous *Snowy*; the gurgling *Gungarlin*. The *Mitta Mitta* has a special place in Keith and Dawn’s heart, and others I’m sure are dear to you. If you live in Kaleen, your street likely bears a river name – *Bokhara*, *Keiwa*, *Callabonna*, *Onkaparinga*, *Maribyrnong*.

There are politically contentious rivers, like the *Franklin* and the *Ord*, and rivers I’ve never heard of – the *Cudgegong*, *Cubrabort*, *Kowrang* and *Duckmaloi*. Actually, I know the *Duckmaloi*; I just want to say its name. And that’s the thing, even saying their names is a pleasure – *Kybeyan*, *Geehi*, *Buckenbourn*, *Numeralla*, *Goodradigbee*, *Coolaburragundy*. At the peak of my river-naming powers (in fourth class), I could rattle off the NSW east draining rivers in less than 3 seconds – *Tweed*, *Richmond*, *Clarence*, *Macleay*, *Manning*, *Hunter*, *Hawkesbury*, *Shoalhaven!!!*

Historically, rivers have formed natural boundaries between different communities and countries. To cross a river was often to make a decisive transition – think of Caesar crossing the Rubicon, of George Washington crossing the icy Delaware, of the people of Israel crossing the Jordan. Across the ages and across the globe, rivers have been the arteries and veins of the land, making possible the flow and flourishing of life. Little wonder then that they are also potent metaphors in the spiritual life.

In our scriptures, rivers – like trees – are there at the beginning and the end. In the creation story in Genesis 2, we read that a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided into four rivers that flowed through the surrounding lands (Do you remember their names?). In the final vision of Revelation, the river of life flows from the throne of God through the middle of the holy city – the new Jerusalem.

And in between, scripture often refers to God’s redemptive action using river imagery. In the prophesy described in chapter 37, Ezekiel sees a spring of water trickling from under the threshold of the temple; and this current gathers momentum, gushing in every direction, and the further it flows the deeper it becomes. And along the banks; trees flourishing. And in its waters; fish flourishing. And ‘wherever it goes, every living creature that swarms will live’, Ezekiel prophesies (47.8-9). In similar fashion, Amos imagines God’s justice ‘rolling down like a river’... ‘like an ever-flowing stream’ (5:24); and Isaiah proclaims that on the day of the Lord, ‘with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation’ (12:3).

All this imagery lies in the background of our gospel reading about Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles. Each day during the week of that festival, the

priests would draw water from the Pool of Siloam and pour it into a bowl that drained down the Temple altar – it was a symbolic action foreshadowing the promised outpouring of the Spirit connected with the appearance of the Messiah. It was on the last and greatest day of this festival that Jesus himself cried out in the Temple: *‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink’*. For, as the scripture has said, *‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water’*. And, as you heard, John identifies this water with the Holy Spirit, to be received by believers after Jesus had died and been raised (i.e. ‘glorified’ in John’s language). And, like a river, this torrent of the Spirit will be refreshing, thirst-quenching, life-giving.

So, there’s a strong tradition of images from the natural world evoking and enhancing our understanding of the spiritual realm, life with God. Indeed, it’s difficult to speak of the spiritual life without recourse to such images – rocks, trees, rivers, deserts... And, this makes sense, for we ourselves are earthlings. We come to know ourselves through our relationship with the earth; and we come to know our Creator in the same way.

And yet, I’m struck as I’ve splashed around in river-y reveries this week by a tendency in Christian life to draw on images from the natural world, and yet to neglect the physical reality from which they spring. As if the imagery only applies one way – the physical world enabling us to appreciate spiritual truths. But does it also work back the other way? What if these spiritual truths and experiences were to inform our way of being in the world, with nature? For example, I’ve evoked the Scriptural image of the Spirit as a river, flowing free, restoring parched lives. But what about the state of the actual rivers I’ve named, the creeks and streams that flow across our land? If you drive to

Kambah Pool or Coppin's Crossing, you'll be struck by the beauty of the Murrumbidgee, for example, the freshness of the deep-green pools and sound of water cascading over granite boulders. But if you drive out to Hay, things seem different. The river looks sick and struggling. In part, it's because of the drought, and in part because so much water is being siphoned off for irrigation, and agricultural run-off is draining back, causing contamination, excessive weed growth, and sedimentation. Can we wax lyrical about spiritual water renewing parched souls, while ignoring the plight of the rivers that inspire this imagery? How long can we be nourished by an image of the Spirit as a river of life, if the rivers in our land are stagnating and dying? And conversely, if the Spirit really is flowing in our hearts (like a river), quickening us in the life and love of our Creator, then surely, we must respond to the degradation of our waterways?

So what would it mean truly to reverence the Spirit in our hearts, and the rivers in our land? Well, perhaps there's something we can learn from the rivers themselves. Take the matter of connection and interdependence, for example. Rivers are natural connectors – they traverse vast distances, coursing through different bio-regions. What happens upstream affects what's possible downstream, as we know from arguments about flows in the Murray-Darling basin. With a river system, you can't avoid the reality of interdependence. This means that to care for our rivers properly requires us to connect to each other, to create communities of shared responsibility. Thankfully, efforts are being made to restore the health of some rivers, to nurture their life and life-giving ecology. Take Merri Creek in Melbourne where neighbourhood groups are working together to clear weed, litter and chemical contamination, to

revegetate denuded banks. Or, if like us, you watch Gardening Australia, you may have seen Dubbo locals working on riparian revegetation on the Macquarie River – and not just the obvious greenies – the town real estate agent was there and the butcher ...!! On a larger scale, there are catchment management initiatives involving multiple stakeholders and co-operative agreements between state governments. These are encouraging signs but there's more to be done practically and politically.

And this is where we come to the significance of the spiritual life, and our connection with the Spirit of God. For in order for this ecological awareness to swell and deepen (like Ezekiel's river), there's a need for prayer. The heedless exploitation of the natural world, the struggle to work together for its (our) well-being – these are signs of deeper alienation and anxiety; a condition that can't be overcome simply by protest, legislation, funding or even education (as important as these are). There's a need for the deep reconciling work of the Spirit, for a shift from fearful grasping and self-interest to the lived-joy of connectedness; delight in the flourishing of the other. And prayer is our access to this shift. Prayer connects us to the liberating wellspring of the Spirit and, more fully, to life around us. We become enablers of flow, channels of the vital current of God's renewing life.

So, what I'm discovering is that the metaphor does go both ways. River imagery is a rich source of revelation in the spiritual life, and the sustaining of our spiritual life has profound implications for the rivers. Rivers reveal the need to be connected to the source – to pray. In prayer, we turn, thirsty, to Christ, and drink. And as we drink, Jesus said, from our hearts 'shall flow rivers of living water' (John 7:38). To open ourselves to this current, changes how we

relate to the natural world. We cannot be unresponsive to its need. There's the 'water' of the Spirit of God; and there's the water of the *Mologolo*, *Murrumbidgee* and *Coolaburragundy*; and it turns out they're not such separate realms after all.