Sermon C Lent 3 2019\_SBC.

*"Bread, cash, dosh, dough, loot, lucre, moolah, readies, the wherewithal: call it what you like, money matters."*
      --Niall Ferguson, author of *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World*

By contrast:

Come to the waters,

you who are thirsty,

though you have nothing,

I bid you come,

and be filled with the good things I have to offer.

Come, listen and live.

Words of a hymn written by Frank Anderson (RC hymn writer popular in the mid-late 80s)

These words are a paraphrase of the wonderful and quite intriguing passage from Isaiah that was read out today. This calling of people to the waters, to the source of life, the place of simplicity and regeneration; this call to them to come and eat and drink was written in the time of Israel’s restoration after the exile. It is right at the end of that part of Isaiah that we call second Isaiah, so the writings are a culmination that is a song of joy and celebration.

What does it mean for the prophet to write that God calls us to the water to eat and drink, and that we shouldn’t worry about bringing any money?

In general terms it means that:

God gives gifts that are worth having;

That these gifts don’t cost anything

That these gifts of God are the most satisfying of all gifts.

However, it is clear that these words would be received differently depending on the context into which they are read. I ask therefore, what would this passage have meant to its original audience: in an Israel restored after the exile?

To this group of people the passage is a celebration of the restoration of Jerusalem and of the temple, the most spiritually satisfying event imaginable to a devout Jew. It would recall God’s faithfulness to the two or so generations of Israelites who had been exiled in Babylon for 50 to 60 years. For them a feast freely provided would be a fitting celebration of their return to Israel. It would also be an anticipation of God’s final victory at the end of the age celebrated by a great heavenly banquet. For those Israelites who throughout the exile had been left behind at home in distressing circumstances, the words would signify hope that their time of poverty and want was drawing to an end, as the second generation of exiles returned, and the Temple and other city buildings were restored to religious and civic order. It has been suggested that this passage may also have been drawing a comparison between the spiritually wholesome gifts that God gives for free, with the commodities that were bought and sold by traders from foreign lands, some of whom had been aggressors in Israel, such as the Phoenicians and the Babylonians. The passage then for this historical group is a way of hearing God’s invitation to reestablish their trust in God whose powers of restoration are greater than the ownership of any material commodities.

I suspect these words might mean something different if read today among people from nations where clean water is a scarce resource, and famine not an unknown occurrence. They probably interpret an apparent invitation to receive the gift of water in literal and not spiritual terms, and they would probably be excited by the idea of a great banquet in the heavenly realm, it would be in line with understanding that God is offering them hope in an ultimate future . They would probably receive these words as the pledge to them of a faithful God who is with them and will remain with them through the daily challenges of life; a life in which thirsting for clean drinking water and the search for food and drink to sustain them physically is an everyday experience. They would probably read these words in a straightforward and quite literalistic way, not because they are simplistic or unspiritual people, but because they are bound up in the business of surviving every day, and their reliance on God to be their faithful provider, and ultimate saviour is uppermost in their minds.

What about if this offer were made to us relatively privileged people of the 21st century?

Can you imagine the response: “Well God, thanks for the offer, but it’s ok I’ve got a water bottle in my backpack. Thirst? I don’t actually remember experiencing that. Maybe when I was sick a few years ago, but not usually. Free wine and milk’s nice, thank you, although, look, I can afford to pay if it would help. I’m a little puzzled about the things that don’t satisfy, that they’re a waste of money somehow. Do you mean there’s something not quite right about my house or car or annual holiday? I recognize I’m privileged to be able to afford these things, but I do feel they’re satisfying in their own way. You offer some things that intrigue me: a covenant? … everlasting, too. You tell me that you have glorified me. Not sure what that means or what I’ve done to deserve it. And you ask me to return to you, when, no offence, I am not sure I ever left you in the first place/ I am not sure I was ever with you in the first place.

This isn’t meant to be an exercise in social irony. I think it’s a fairly accurate characterization of 2025 attitudes that don’t see the force of the gifts of God in the Isaiah passage because they/we are privileged and are usually able to source these basic commodities of food and drink by ourselves. For contemporary western people the passage works best if it is understood as a metaphor for getting our values right spiritually.

It appears we can only value the free gifts that God offers here if we realise that we are spiritually hungry and thirsty and in need of God to sustain us by the Holy Spirit and to open up real gratitude in our lives. We need to know that often in a spiritual sense we are bereft of God because we look for our satisfactions in terms of material possessions; compulsive behaviours like eating and drinking too much; in boastfulness about what we own instead of clear talking about who were are: a holy people with distinctive Christian values.

And if Christians are confused, it is likely that people with no faith background will be even more puzzled about what this passage means. So, when that new person who has never come to church before rocks up at ours one Sunday, how are we going to help them make sense of God’s invitation to come to the water? And how can we honour and not overwhelm the delicate reality that in some ways they’ve begun to respond to the Holy Spirit, simply by being there? **Amen.**