

Living Water

- Third Sunday of Lent
- March 7, 2021
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

“Come to the waters, you who are thirsty, says the Lord; you who have no money, come and drink joyfully.”

Jesus said: “If you knew the gift of God, and who is saying to you ‘Give me a drink’, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

Again, Jesus said: “Whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in (them) a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

“Living water” means water that is fresh and that flows. Let me tell you a story on this Sunday of Lent as we deepen our awareness of our baptism by coming to living water. I was making a retreat once at the Jesuit retreat house in Northern Wales. I saw on my ordinance survey map that there was an ancient well or spring across the valley, so I decided to take a day to make a pilgrimage there on foot, five miles there and five miles back, praying along the way. When I got to the well on the friendly farmer’s land—with his less friendly dog—I found that it was an artesian spring, set in a rock basin of an eight-point star, bubbling up and flowing. It was called Ffynnon Fair—Mary’s Well—and was on a medieval pilgrim route. Next to it was a chapel in ruins, built in the 1200s. From the bubbling well living water flowed along a channel into what had been a baptismal basin in the ruined church, without roof, crumbling.

Long I prayed there joyfully reflecting that here was the living water of baptism, a “spring of water welling up to eternal life”. Pilgrims like me had come here a thousand years earlier, had found this same well bubbling then for them as it was for me now, and they too had prayed here about “living water welling up to eternal life” in them as I prayed about it in me. Their coming here was lost in the past as my baptism as a newborn baby at Our Lady of Good Hope in Hoquiam is lost in my past. But the water still flowed; my baptism still flows in me as a well of God’s grace leading to eternal life. The grace of baptism is indeed a living, fresh flowing water, the living water in us of God’s grace, not just then, when we were baptized, but like that artesian spring still flowing, still accessible, still to be tapped, to be dipped into, to refresh and revitalize us in our thirst on our life’s pilgrimage now. As that artesian spring flowing into the baptismal font of the ruined church was as real now as it was a thousand years ago, so our baptisms are as real now for us as the baptisms at the Easter Vigil will be real for those who will be baptized. Baptism is not for a moment, but for a lifetime, and not only for a lifetime but for eternal life. Let’s all heed the invitation of God. “Come to the waters, you who are thirsty; you who have no money come and drink joyfully.” I love that last word, “joyfully”.

It has also come to me that they built that church next to the flowing spring that was already there. They did not build a fountain next to the church. So, our church, both this St. James Cathedral, and our whole Catholic Church, and the Church built of living stones, the People of God, is built next to the living water of the Spirit given by Christ which flows into the Church.

The Church only is at all because of the living water welling up to eternal life given by Christ its founder and it depends for its life on his living spring of grace continuously flowing into it.

The fountain, the spring, the well is prior to the Church in every sense of “prior”. We may think at times that the roof of our Church has fallen in—as the dome of this cathedral once fell—that our Church is in ruins for lack of care. It will be rebuilt, can only be rebuilt, next to living water flowing into it, the grace of God welling up in each of us and all of us together.

We should also heed the call “Come to the waters, you who are thirsty”, as we all thirst to be able to come together again as our full community of the people of God in our churches, beyond this impeding pandemic, since as the ancient teaching says, “Come especially to the assembly to pray because it is in the assembly that the Spirit abounds.” The fountain flows into the gathering of the baptized community.

Let us all in this Lent “come to the waters” of our baptism and “drink joyfully”.