



First Sunday after Trinity
Sunday 26 June 2011

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Readings: Romans 6.12-end; Matthew 10.40-end

Water by Philip Larkin

If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.

Going to church
Would entail a fording
To dry, different clothes;

My liturgy would employ
Images of sousing,
A furious devout drench,

And I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.

Water is a miraculous thing. There are times in my life when I have been hungry. It's not very pleasant but you can bear it. But lack of water, drought, is unbearable; you dry up, literally, feel your tongue like dry leather, your throat sticking, your head light then spinning, your body becoming not just tired but withering, longing for water. They say there has been a drought in the UK, and farmers are understandably worried. But for most of us, we do not realise, it's not a drought that we really feel, and we still complain about the rain when it comes. It's not months and months without rain. Water still pours out of our taps and showers and flows down our rivers. When I lived in the tropics we used to wait through the long dry season, praying for the rain. Those last months of dry heat when everything turned to fine dust, and died, when you had long since drained the last drips of the rain-water tank, long after the river had first narrowed and thickened like curd and then died and dried up altogether. When all the toilets had dried up, when the walks to fetch water became longer and longer... you waited for the rain to come, in your dry bones you longed for it, felt your whole body crusting in the dust. And then one day when you had almost given up hope of the rains ever coming, you felt the temperature change, smelt the smell of rain in the air, felt the wind and heard the fall of rain moving fast across the leaf canopy of rain trees towards you. I remember the joyful cry of the children as they ran into the road to feel the first huge droplets splashing down on their foreheads, opening their mouths to gulp the clean water and it gushing down their chests and backs like water chutes. All of us used to run for the church when the first rains came armed with water containers for there the rain overflowed from the roof gutters pouring down on our heads in torrents, washing away the months of dust: the whole community alive and shouting with whoops of joy. Within days the dust was alive again with green shoots bursting through.

Often the simplest things are the very greatest of miraculous gifts: without water there would be no life. We are called into relationship with the gifts of creation. Not something to be plundered or

sold for our gain but part of the circle of life to which we belong. St Francis called water his sister: Praise be to God for sister water, most humble, life sustaining, precious and pure.

Jesus Christ knew the beauty and power of water. In his ministry water becomes a sign of relationship and the gift of new life. Christ goes into the water of the Jordan to be baptised. Christ stills the raging of the waters during the storm on the lake. He comes to his disciples walking across the water and water becomes the test of their trust and faith. But water not only reveals Christ's divinity but also his humanity: He too knew what it was like to thirst. Remember how he asks the woman by the well for a drink? Remember the water with which he washed his disciples feet? Remember his agony on the cross: "I thirst" and the water and blood which pours from his side when he dies. In this 10th chapter of Matthew's Gospel we have been given a lesson in mission; what it means to be both the guest and the host, what it means to be both welcomed and rejected. And in the gospel passage we have just read the gift of water becomes again a sign of divine hospitality: "Whoever welcomes me welcomes you and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me". He says "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple, none of these shall lose their reward". A cup of cold water for another becomes a sign of the gifts of God we are called to share.

One of the best pastors I have ever known is a Roman Catholic Irish priest who used to live at Holy Cross Cathedral in the very hot and dusty capital of Honiara, Fr. Jim Nolan. Whenever I visited him he always had a row of visitors under his veranda waiting for a chance to talk to him. He made time for each person who visited him, and as I watched him it was as if each person he spoke to and listened to was for that moment the most important person in the world. He is also one of the humblest people I have ever met. "You have a great gift of hospitality," I told him. "Not a bit of it!" was always his reply "it's just a ministry of cold water, that's all it is; that's all they come for, cold water and I am grateful to them. For without cold water who would ever visit me?" But I knew differently – water was the outward sign of the refreshment Fr. Jim offered to each one of his guests. That was why I was there too, for a glass of cold water and the knowledge that here was someone who really listened and cared. The water was the outward sign of an inward grace: an attentiveness I and many others thirsted for. Here was a place where we were really welcome.

May Sarton in her poem *A Glass of Water* writes this:

Here is a glass of water from my well
It tastes of rock and root and rain;
It is the best I have my only spell,
And it is cold and better than champagne.
Perhaps someone will pass this house one day
To drink and be restored and go his way,
Someone in dark confusion as I was
When I drank down cold water in a glass
Drank a transparent health to keep me sane
After the bitter mood had gone again

And love returned to heal the pain.

In our Gospel passage water is a sign of that same attentiveness to the other, that gift of hospitality where in welcoming the other we are welcoming Christ. We enter into the circle of God's reciprocity. Our faith is about both giving and receiving, receiving and giving. And both roles can be difficult. Sometimes we may feel we have nothing to share, at other times we may feel threatened by those who offer to share with us. But Christ calls us into the to and fro of reciprocity: a call to welcome and to be welcomed as the person we truly are, a call to be both guest and host. This is the theme we will be exploring this year at our Parish Weekend. It is also the theme taken up by Nick

on the front cover of this week's newsletter in which he writes about the way the welcoming of the stranger is one of the great insights and disciplines of Christianity which shapes us as a community; not only in the way we treat others but in the way through the attentive recognition of others we too come to fruition.

Last week we celebrated Trinity Sunday. Trinity, I think, is one of the most difficult theories in the Christian faith either to explain or fully understand. Perhaps that it is because at its heart it is not a theory or a formula, rather it is a lived relationship with God and with others. In confessing the Trinity we affirm that the eternal life of God is lived in relationship. It is not something static but a circle of love into which we are called. The Father loves the Son, the Son loves us, we are filled with his Spirit, leading us back into the Father. The Trinity is the sign of the giving and receiving of love and life which is at the heart of understanding of God. To affirm the Trinity is to affirm that God exists in community: the Lover, the Beloved, and the Spirit of their mutual love. Like the precious gift of water received, giving life to the dry earth, quenching our thirst becoming the precious gift we offer to others. Trinitarian love calls the guest to become the host, calls the recipient of God's love to become the sharer of it, calls each one of us into the *action* of God's love. Leonardo Boff writes 'The Trinity lays the foundations for a society of brothers and sisters as equals in which dialogue, consensus and the sharing of God's gifts are the constituents of living together in both the church and the world.'

Perhaps this divine reciprocity is difficult to explain in words. Today I have hung Rublev's icon of the Trinity in front of us. Three equal persons, the circle of God's love. The cup on the table waiting to be received and we, the onlooker, called into that circle; called to take the place at the centre of the table and to share the cup of God's love for us.

When someone leaves us who has shared a lot with us, who has been much loved, who has become so much part of that circle of give and take, we often fear that the gift they have shared so generously will run out, that the circle will be broken, and we will all experience drought. But perhaps it is better to see it more in terms of the circle of God's love widening. Because in truth the circle is never broken, it just always allows space for others to enter in. The circle widens, yes widens, to include all of us, widens, but the living spring never ceases.