

Sermon Archive 603

Sunday 13 September, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflection on the gift of Water

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A Water Audit

The photo on the front page of the order of service is one I took at Contemplation Point, which is at the end of a path in the Styx Mill Wetland Conservation Reserve. Contemplation Point is about a ten / fifteen minute walk from the carpark. The first thing you do, after locking up your car in the carpark, is go through the predator-free gate, into the reserve. The first time I went for a longer walk through the reserve, I came out the other end to notice that there was no fence there. The brilliant predator-free fence, creating a wonderful break at one end, peetered out before forming a complete circle. It's a matter of funding, apparently. A good start, insufficient resources to make a good ending. Concerning our caring for the planet, how common is that?

Anyway, at Contemplation Point, you can sit on a generously donated wooden seat, or you can sit on a rock, and dangle your bare feet in the water. The water is clean enough for eels, and fresh-water shrimp. There are dragonflies and water birds. It's described in various reports as "actively recovering" from introduced weeds, pests and surrounding urban growth. Meanwhile, in other parts of Waitaha Canterbury, there are concerns about nitrate levels in the water.

Up the road, in poor old Pōneke Wellington, a major concern is around fountains playing in public streets where no fountains are scheduled. Infrastructure tasked with taking water to and from the houses of the people (clean water in, brackish water out) groans and collapses as age-old pipes fracture and crumble. People are saying "we see the need to fix this problem. We understand the levy - but we just don't have the money".

To the back of our minds, we have the people of Havelock North, who ten years ago drank bad water. Five and a half thousand contracted poisoning, and three died.

Currently, there is some conversation about whether Southland ought to welcome an international data centre. Part of the challenge is the provision of electricity - and part is the need to provide water to keep the system cool. The resource

consent allows for over 600,000 litres of ground water per day. Argument spins around that figure, and whether that would ever be required. It is consented.

Beyond our lovely shores, across the waters of the oceans, Peace Studies analysts note that in the past people went to war over opium, gold, oil . . . The predictions are that future wars will be over water. Recent news from France is that nuclear power stations are being put off-line, because there's insufficient water in the rivers to guarantee the cooling of the reactors.

Here's a Bible reading with fresh flowing water as its central motif.

Lesson: Ezekiel 47: 1-12

Reflection: Living Water from a context of loss

It begins as a tiny wee flow from the east end - off down that way. Maybe we didn't even notice it. Then there are a few trickles from the South side - maybe that's when we notice. We employ a surveyor, who turns up with his technical gear - a piece of rope to measure depth. He also brings his body - which seems to become the principal measuring tool - ankle deep, then knee deep, then waist deep, then "nah, this is a river that cannot be crossed".

If you're in the business of keeping people safe from drowning on flooded fords, then you read escaping water as a problem. I can tell you, as someone who once watched water levels rising, while my drains weren't working well, that great anxiety can come from ankle, knee, waist . . . Phone calls are put through to Council and Insurance - all about the damage that rising water can do.

However, the person telling *this* story notes that the great river of water doesn't bring damage. It brings life. Along the edges of the river, trees grow, on one side and the other. The trees attract living creatures - and the waters attract fish and swarming creatures, marsh creatures, riparian creatures - insects, birds, recovering eco-systems including barefoot preachers looking for contemplation . . . It's a celebration of what Ezekiel calls the "living waters".

That's the Biblical image.

Here's some historical context.

Ezekiel was sharing his vision of the flowing waters in a time when the temple had just been destroyed. Once a great symbol of the people (and of their being special to God), the proud building in Jerusalem had been turned into dust. The temple was gone.

So the first people to receive Ezekiel's vision of the living waters would have noticed that the water was flowing from a spiritual source now lost.

I wonder what you do, if you're a person of faith, and one of your prophets shares an image life flowing from a temple that no longer exists. Some people of faith might cry (hang up your harps and weep by the waters of Babylon). Others might laugh (like Sarah laughed at the promise of life for barrenness). Others might pray. But some, just a few to begin with, decided to respond by rebuilding. Pick up the bricks, retrieve the wood - take a breath and build something to frame the vision of the prophet - to make again the temple from which the living waters could flow.

The sad reality of the situation was that the second temple would never be as grand as the first. The first grew from immense success and confidence and plenty. It grew from strength, power and cultural privilege. The second grew from war wounds - from resilience, stretched resources, hope and making do. They got knocked down, but they got up again. In that respect, the more modest second temple would always be a better one than the first - a wiser and more knowledgeable one. As soon as you consider the state of loss that the people felt with respect to the broken temple, the vision of living waters flowing from it changes. Living water comes not from power, advantage, what stands strong. It flows from something lost and fallen - like A Christ who shows his scars and says "life begins again". In response to this vision, the people of loss rebuilt.

In the middle of the Season of Creation, as we consider the gift of water, two questions present themselves. Have we lost something? And if we have, can we rebuild it?

Here's a local water story. In the early 1900s, a couple of very simple buildings appeared next to Waihora Lake Ellesmere, near the mouth of the Halswell River Motukārara. The people who built them called them "huts", rather than "houses". I don't think there was anything as formal in place as building consent. Over time, the settlement, by then called the Greenpark Huts, expanded to a population of 32 (17 residents full time). The lease agreements actually prohibited full time occupancy. Leasees weren't meant to stay for more than 183 days per year - but nobody had seemed interested in monitoring or enforcing that. It was sort of a "live at your own risk" arrangement.

Then, in 1998 the land was returned to its customary owner, Ngai Tahu. As those who now had responsibility for the land, and the safety of those who lived on it, Ngai Tahu identified three issues.

1. Provision of clean drinking water was a challenge, since water quality tests were yielding troubling results. The lake was dirty and getting dirtier. It was a water quality problem.

2. Lake levels were rising, so flooding was going to become more frequent. This was particularly concerning, given the primitive nature of the waste water systems - and the inclination of poo to rise during rainy times. It was a sea level problem, and a potential water-borne disease problem.

3. Prior to Pakeha settlement, the site had been a traditional food gathering place. To that extent, the huts on the land represented a desecration. It was a cultural problem.

Rather than attempt to upgrade the infrastructure to meet proper health, safety and cultural standards, requiring money that nobody had, Ngai Tahu gave the residents four years' notice. Nowadays, if you go out to the lake, you will find no huts.

Have we lost something? The residents certainly believe so - a loss of community, of home. But we need to ask whether the loss of the huts is somehow a gain for the whenua. A million culture wars could be declared over that. But also, perhaps we need to confess that the major loss was suffered when the water turned brackish, and no one could drink. Another loss was when the levels of the lake started to rise, because rising waters is something happening everywhere. When did the water begin to lose?

Floods occur in other places, and water quality issues present themselves in other places. Do you remember the Flockton Basin floods of 2021. The Council poured lots of resources into the neighbourhood - maybe because it wasn't a distant community of 32, but a suburb in the middle of town. Not so sure, however, that Dunedin's City Council will be able to do the same in South Dunedin (2,610 residents). Not so sure about the residents of Westport (4,600 residents).

As we have failed to care for the water, what has been lost, what is being lost, and what can be rebuilt? Are there some things we will never get back again? What are our major responsibilities?

Perhaps some do not care to consider these questions. But we have received a vision of living waters flowing from a beloved temple that now is lost. We stand in the tradition of those who received this vision, and responded to the loss by rebuilding what they could - so that living water could flow into the world.

Do we continue to lose what we are losing? Or do we take up the tools?

A moment of quiet.

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