

## ***Are You Thirsty?***

In the name of him who invites us to come to him and drink, dear friends in Christ: When it comes to the general sorts of things you can do to maintain good health, the experts pretty well agree on these four basic rules: don't smoke, eat less, exercise more, *and drink more water*. Regarding the last, most of us don't drink nearly enough water as we should. And what we do drink usually comes in the form of coffee, soda pop, so-called energy drinks, and alcohol, all of which are water that's full of a lot of stuff we'd be better off without – or at least not as much of. No, what our bodies really need is just plain old pure simple water: about eight 8 ounce glasses each day – unless you're exercising hard or working outside in the heat, in which case you need a lot more.

Why? It's because water is absolutely essential to your body. It accounts for about 60% of your body weight, and every system of your physiology depends upon it. You need it for the obvious things like circulation, body cooling, digestion, and flushing wastes and impurities from the blood; and also for not-so-obvious things like brain function, joint health, and your body's defenses against attack by germs to name but a few. And the truth is that because the vast majority of us don't drink as much water as we should, we keep ourselves partially dehydrated, which makes all these systems work at less than optimum levels. Your body is a whole lot more thirsty than you probably think it is, and it's not good for you. And there's really no excuse for this. We have the benefit of living in a place where high quality drinking water is abundantly available and relatively inexpensive. All you have to do is turn on the tap. Most people in the world do not have this luxury. They live where water is much harder to get and most of what's available would be considered unsafe to drink by our standards. As a result, however, they have to think about water a lot more than we do. Lacking it, they appreciate it more because every day they are reminded that water is life. Without it you simply cannot survive.

The people of ancient Israel understood this. Theirs was, after all, a semiarid land bordered to the south and east by barren desert wastelands, and to the west by a salt sea. And while they had enough water to get by most of the time, it didn't take much of a dry spell to bring dangerous drought conditions upon them. Then there would be enough water to drink perhaps, drawn from wells; but not enough to raise the grain crops upon which their lives depended. So they were grateful for every drop of rain that fell. For them it was basic survival. And if that were not enough to make them conscious of just how important water was to them, they were annually required by the Lord to remember a time in their history when water was almost always in short supply.

This is in part what the Feast of Tabernacles was all about – that's the Feast mentioned in this morning's Gospel reading. You might think of it as the Israelite Harvest and Thanksgiving festival; but they did things differently. Instead of celebrating by eating and drinking to excess like we usually do at Thanksgiving, they tightened their belts and scaled back their consumption of food and water. You see, in order to help them better appreciate the good land the Lord gave them, they were required every year to spend the eight days of the Feast of Tabernacles roughing it. The idea was that they were to relive the wilderness wanderings of their forefathers in the desert with Moses. At that time God's people spent forty years living in tents, moving from place to place in the desert; and their diet consisted of mostly of manna, the bread the Lord miraculously provided from heaven each day, and water, which, when not otherwise available

from an oasis or a spring, was also miraculously provided by the Lord – like he did when Moses struck the rock and water gushed forth from it.

So to recreate these conditions and to get a feel for what their ancestors endured, what God's people would do to observe the Feast of Tabernacles was move out of the comfort of their permanent homes and live in tents or hastily built lean-tos made of palm leaves and tree branches. They'd go without their furniture and sleep on the ground. And they'd limit their diet to very simple things: primarily bread and water, deliberately drinking less water than normal so they'd get a taste of what it was to be thirsty all the time. The hope was that this relatively short period of austerity would help the people to be more grateful for the rich land the Lord gave them, and for their homes, their orchards, their vineyards, and all the good things they had in abundance in the Promised Land, which truly did flow with milk and honey.

But there was more to the Feast of Tabernacles than just roughing it for eight days. There were also a number of religious ceremonies that helped teach and reinforce the spiritual lessons the Lord wanted to impress upon his people. And the most significant of these ceremonies was the one that took place in the Temple on the last and greatest day of the Feast. The ceremony began when a priest carrying a golden flagon would march from the Temple leading a long procession of singing worshippers who were waving palm branches. They'd go down from the Temple mount through the winding streets of Jerusalem to its lowest point, where the Pool of Siloam was. This pool had important function and history. You see, the city of Jerusalem had no natural water source within its walls. There were cisterns and pools that collected rainwater; but no natural springs or wells. And in the ancient world, this put the city at great risk. If an enemy army came along and laid siege to the city, it wouldn't take long at all until it would have to surrender for lack of water. This problem was solved in the days of King Hezekiah, around 700 BC. It turns out that there was a spring in the Kidron Valley upstream and not very far away from the city. It was called the Gihon, which means "to bubble up" or "spring forth"; but it was popularly nicknamed "The Virgin". Anyway, they decided to cover and camouflage this spring so that no one could see it was there, and they dug a tunnel through the solid rock under the wall to divert its water into the city. There it flowed into a reservoir, namely, the Pool of Siloam, which means "the Sent One" (presumably because it was sent into the city from the outside). So, the thing to see is that this pool, the Sent One, was the city's source of life whenever it was surrounded by enemies and under attack.

It was from this pool, then, that the priest leading the procession drew this life-sustaining water. Amid much ceremony he'd fill up the golden flagon, and then the whole procession would turn around and head back up the hill to the Temple, continuing to sing joyful psalms all the way and getting louder and more boisterous as they approached the sacred courts. Upon arrival, the festive throng would make seven complete circuits around the Altar of Sacrifice. This was the massive stone altar upon which was burned the blood of the lambs and other animals that were sacrificed to atone for the sins of the people. The procession marched around and around it, and all the while the singing and the branch waving would become more energetic, building to a crescendo of exultant praise. And then, the seventh circuit completed, the priest with the flagon would step up to the altar—and everything would stop. A hush would fall over the crowd – all eyes on the leader and the golden vessel in his hands. The priest would then pour its contents onto to altar, where there were drain openings that allowed the water to percolate down through its center, finally to emerge again maybe a half a minute or so later at an opening in the altar base. And just as soon as the crowd saw the water again, now flowing out from the altar, it would once again erupt with exclamations of praise and a chorus of joyful singing.

The idea behind all this was twofold. First – again remembering that this festival was all about reliving the hardships of the wilderness wanderings and reflecting upon the Lord’s gracious provision for his people during that time – you have the idea that the altar represented the rock in the desert that Moses struck at the Lord’s command in order to give water to the thirsty Israelites. It reminded everyone how the Lord miraculously preserved the lives of his people when they were in great distress and in danger of dying of thirst – which again is why the water was drawn from Siloam: the city’s emergency water supply and source of life in times of trouble. That’s what you had happening on a physical level. But there was a spiritual message as well. This wasn’t really the rock in the desert; this was the Altar of Sacrifice. It was here that the blood of the sacrificial victims was poured by which the Lord forgave the sins of his people. It was this that allowed them to live before the Holy God and be righteous in his sight. This is what preserved their lives in an absolute sense. So the idea was that this wasn’t just water flowing from the altar; it was a picture of God’s mercy, love, and forgiveness flowing forth and giving life; that is, Life with a capital “L”.

Got all that? Okay, now back up a bit. Picture yourself at this ceremony. It’s the eighth day of the Feast. You’ve been living in a tent for a week, sleeping on the hard ground; living on bread and a small ration of water. It’s a very hot and dry day. You’ve followed the priest down to the Pool of Siloam and back. You were already thirsty when you started; and now after all that singing and shouting, your mouth is thick and sticky. You really could use a drink of water. And now you’re at the point in the ceremony when the priest is pouring that cool water – that cool water that looks so good right now – on top of the altar. You’re standing there in silence waiting for the water to appear at the base. Your eyes are focused on that spot because you know that when that water appears, you’ll sing and shout some more in praise to the Lord for all his goodness – and then the whole thing is over. You get to go home, to your real home, not just the tent. All this roughing it is over. Tonight there’s going to be a real feast with plenty to drink with all your family in the comfort of your own home. So you’re watching intently, licking your dry lips thinking how good that’s going to be.

And suddenly from behind you there’s a voice calling out loud and clear across the Temple court, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’.” You turn to look. You want to see whoever it is that’s so rude as to interrupt and rob this important ceremonial climax of its significance. And there he is: you see it’s Jesus standing there with his arms extended in welcome.

Understand what Jesus is saying. He’s telling all these people that now that he’s here, they’re looking in the wrong place. He’s saying that everything represented by the water that they’re looking for at the base of the altar is fulfilled in him. “I am the Sent One”, he’s telling them. “Sent by the Father and born of the Virgin. I am the Rock in the wilderness, which Moses struck and from which your forefathers drank. I am the source of your life. I am the Altar and the Sacrifice. It’s my blood that atones for sin and allows you to live before God righteous in his sight. I am the Spring from which flow the love, the mercy, and the forgiveness of God. I am the source of Life both temporal and eternal. Come to me and drink, and never thirst again. Drink from me and from within you will flow rivers of living water.”

And just in case we have any doubt about what he means, the Apostle John tells us, “This he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were about to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”

Dear friends, listen: Jesus *has* now been glorified. It happened first when he was lifted up upon the cross and crowned with thorns. There he displayed God's glory manifest in the love he has for you in giving himself as the sacrifice for your sin. There he was the rock struck by Moses, the Law, for your sake. And from his side flowed the stream of water and blood that gives you life. He was glorified again three days later when he rose from the dead in his glorified body, which he showed to his disciples. And he was glorified a third time forty days later when he ascended into heaven and assumed his place at his Father's right hand, with all powers and dominions subject to him. The glorification of Jesus is complete.

And from his glorified position he now sends the Holy Spirit. As the Father sent to Son to lead us to the Father, so now also the Son sends the Spirit to lead us to Father through the Son. And this marks a shift in the way things are. It's like going from living in the desert where water is scarce into the land flowing with milk and honey and where springs of living water abound. It's the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus that makes the shift possible. Before his passion and death for sin, you were a contaminated vessel unfit for God's Spirit to dwell within; like a leaking, filthy, rusting old can. By now you've been cleansed by Jesus' blood. You've become a new creation; a golden vessel carried by the great High Priest, Jesus himself. Now you can contain his Spirit – the Spirit of the Sent One – and from you the Spirit can be poured out to others. That's what we see in today's reading from Acts: having been filled by the Spirit and empowered by his gifts, the disciples begin to pour out the Spirit to others by proclaiming Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. And they too, when they are baptized, receive the Holy Spirit from Jesus.

What's all this got to do with you? Everything. Because Jesus still beckons us to come to him and drink. Why? It's because we're thirsty; but just as the vast majority of us don't drink as much water as we should to keep our bodies healthy and functioning properly, so also we keep ourselves in a constant state of spiritual dehydration because we don't get enough of the Holy Spirit. We treat him like Brill Cream: A little dab'll do you ya. "I believe in Jesus. I'm pretty sure I'm going to heaven one day. Isn't that enough? Why should I need any more?" And we are spiritually unhealthy as a result. I mean ask yourself, how often do you feel that your faith in Jesus is limp and wilted and not producing any results? Why is it that you have trouble overcoming certain temptations? Why is the struggle against sin so hard? Why do you view others so suspiciously, critically, and judgmentally? Why don't you feel the urge to pray for them and help them? Why are you so grouchy, ill tempered, easily annoyed and offended? Why are you so difficult to please and envious of other's success? Why aren't you experiencing more of the fruits of the Spirit – fruits like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and compassion? Why is it so hard to forgive others? Why aren't you motivated to grow in Christian virtue, knowledge, wisdom, and discernment? The answer is that your soul is thirsty for the Spirit. Your Christian walk is lacking – running on low – because you are trying to rough it. Don't do that.

Today – and every day – Jesus invites us to come to him and drink. He's the one who gives the Spirit in full measure. He's the one who made it possible for the Spirit to live in and with us. And he wants very much to pour out his Spirit upon you to beyond overflowing. So examine yourself. Recognize the symptoms of spiritual thirst not in your mouth but in your heart and in your life. And then meet Jesus who comes to you in his Word, in his Sacraments, and in the lives of the people of his Church, and he will pour out his Spirit upon you. You have his sure and certain promise. Therefore let us pray: Come Holy Spirit, enter in, and in our hearts your work begin, now and always. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***