Thirsty Heart, Living Water
John 7:36-52

We're looking at John's gospel, and at the part where Jesus is in Jerusalem at the Feast of Booths, the Feast of Tabernacles. And Tabernacles remembered how God had provided for Israel in the desert - including with water. And on each of the seven days of the feast, a procession would carry a large golden vessel down to the Pool of Siloam, fill it with water, before carrying it back to the temple. And then, at the time of the morning sacrifice, the water, along with the wine of the daily drink offering, was poured out to God.

And as that feast reaches its climax, v37, 'On the last day of the feast, the great day,' Jesus uses that image of Israel in the desert, thirsty for water, and God providing for them, and of wine and water poured out and running across the ground, to talk about our hearts and what we most need.

So that's what we're going to look at. Firstly, our need and Christ's offer; secondly, what stands in the way of accepting that offer; and thirdly; if you want it, how to receive it.

Our Need and Christ's Offer
Verse 37, 'On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink."'

Now thirst is said to be our strongest physical sensation. It can even be painful. Or it least, it can get to the point where you are desperate to satisfy it - as your body tells you, you need water.

But, of course, Jesus isn't talking about our physical need. He's talking about our heart needs. And yet, he uses the strongest of physical desires to describe that need.

Now, we still talk like this today, don't we. I recently read an article about a politician that described him as being way too thirsty. Thirsty for attention, thirsty to be noticed, thirsty to be in the news - to the point where they're just a bit too desperate.

But you don't have to be a politician, do you? And it doesn't have to be to the degree that it makes you look desperate. And you don't have to be thirsty for attention, though you might be. But you're almost certainly thirsty for something - for love, or affection, or intimacy. For peace, security, or control, For purpose, meaning, or to know that you matter. For what is wrong in your life to be put right. And Jesus says that, like people in a desert, we long for, we need water - for something to fill our hearts.

And the question is, where do you go for that water? You see, look how he describes what he's offering, v38 "living water." Fresh, running water. As opposed to stagnant water.

Now, the village where we live is 99% wonderful. The 1% that isn't are the mosquitos. Walk in the woods, or sit out on the balcony past a certain hour and you will be eaten alive. Why? Because there's stagnant water up in the woods. And the danger is that when you begin to recognise your thirst - maybe for love, or acceptance, or meaning, you'll look to stagnant water to satisfy you.

Several years back I was asked to meet with someone who needed to talk to a pastor. And the night before he'd been with a prostitute, and he was guilt ridden. So I asked him, 'was it any good?' And he said, no it was awful. Of course, the advert had promised him it'd be great. And he'd told himself it would quench his loneliness - but it was like drinking stagnant water. Now it doesn't have to be yuk at the time - it can simply be the mosquitos, and you keep getting bitten. You think, this

relationship or that relationship will do it, but the hurts accumulate. You think being in control will do it, but others just see you as demanding or argumentative, and you get more wounded. You think career success will do it, but other things suffer, your health, your family, and it's not just your time that's being eaten up, you are. Your heart is. Death by a thousand bites.

But the water doesn't have to be stagnant, it could just be salty. And drink salt water and you end up even more thirsty. And try and quench your inner thirst with anything from this created order, like getting married, or having the perfect family, or getting fit, or owning the latest gadget. And it works for a bit, but it doesn't last. And like drinking salt water, your craving will grow, and you'll become more demanding of your spouse or your kids or your colleagues or yourself. Or you'll realise it's *not* working and start looking elsewhere for something you think will.

Instead, Jesus is saying, if you recognise you're thirsty, he's the one who can satisfy you. Like you're out hiking and you're hot and tired and thirsty and you come across a tap, a fountain, of clear mountain water. And Jesus is saying, I am that inexhaustible spring of fresh water to your soul. A flow that never ceases - in summer or winter, in the good times and the bad. So, come *to me* and drink.

But if you do, what does he give you? Because it's not some metaphysical, religious experience, is it. Verse 39, 'Now this he said about the Spirit.' And so the reason things like relationships, or family, or career, or control will not ultimately satisfy, is that they are good, but they're not God. They're created, they're not the Creator. And your thirst is a God-sized thirst, and only God can quench it.

And if you come to me, Jesus says, that's exactly what I'll give you. God himself will fill your heart - in deep, satisfying, daily refreshing relationship.

So why wouldn't you come and experience that - if you're not yet a Christian, or if you are but you're not yet living in the good of that?

What Stands in the Way

As Jesus teaches, there are a whole load of different reactions to him, aren't there? Some, v40, are saying, "This is the Christ." He's the one we've been waiting for. But that wasn't the only response.

Verse 40, 'Some of the people said, "This really is *the Prophet*."' And when Israel was in the desert, Moses predicted that one day God would send a prophet greater than him. And these people are thinking, Jesus is that prophet. So they're not against him, they're for him. They know he's special, but they're not yet fully there.

And maybe that's you. You know enough about Jesus to know he's not just another religious teacher. But you don't yet believe he's the incarnate son of God who can fully and finally satisfy you. You listen to his teaching, you like it, maybe you even try and live by it. But he's not yet your Lord, he's not the fountain to your soul.

But if they agreed Jesus was out of the ordinary, others did not. Verse 41, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee?" Now, who is that group of people, maybe even of your fellow countrymen, who you think of and go, 'Nah!'? For the Scots it's the English. For the Irish, it's the English. For the Welsh, it's the English. And for the English, it's the French. And the Germans.

But if you lived in Jerusalem, it was the Galileans. Because they were backwater, backwoods, theologically and politically compromised rednecks. And Jesus was from Galilee, so 'there's *no way* he's the messiah!'

But did you notice, they even had Bible verses to back it up. Verse 42, "Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" Now, if you know John's gospel, you know he likes irony. And if they had done just a bit of digging, or if they'd just asked him, they would have discovered he *was* a descendant of David, and that he *was* born in Bethlehem.

Recently I was talking to a friend who was making it very clear to me why he's not a Christian: 'that God would become a man, 2000 years ago, in some poxy little Middle Eastern country, and save us by dying and rising again, that's pathetic. It's so parochial, so pitiful, so small, so backwoods. Is that the best God can do?'

It's the modern day version of '*Galilee??* If and when God sends his Messiah it will be better than from Galilee.' And maybe your skepticism, that this story from 2000 years ago could have anything to say to your heart, is what blocks your way.

But what if that's the point? What if God uses the small and the weak, the parochial and the pitiful, to humble the strong and the powerful?

Or maybe there are other issues with the Bible that are blocking your way, or sapping your confidence. Because here people are saying, Jesus cannot be the Messiah - read the Bible. And today people are saying, Christianity cannot be true - just read the Bible. Look at the contradictions, look at it's teachings. There's no way Jesus is anything special.

A few years after I became a Christian we had a big family gathering and the subject of religion came up, as it does! And an uncle said, 'well, obviously you can't believe the Bible, it's so full of errors and contradictions.' And I happened to have a Bible on the table next to me, so I passed it to him and said, 'show me one.' It's the sort of arrogant thing you do when you're young!

And he couldn't, because he'd never read the Bible. He'd just heard someone say that, and it confirmed him in his beliefs, or lack of them. Now, does that mean there aren't hard things in the Bible? No, but there are no deal breakers. But maybe you're holding back on Christianity because you've heard or read this stuff about the Bible being a problem; or maybe you *are* a Christian, but you're heart is cold, and your doubts are growing, because you *also* hear this stuff and it bothers you.

Well, doubts are often like rats in the basement, aren't they - turn the light on, and they scurry away. And there really is a light that can dispel your doubt, or answer your questions. But you've got to turn it on. Like these guys should have and could have, sometimes it takes some effort on our part. But if the choice is between a dry and parched heart, and one running over with water, it's worth the effort.

But then there are the officers, sent to arrest him. Verses 45-46, ‘The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, “Why did you not bring him?” The officers answered, “No one ever spoke like this man!”

Now, the temple officers were not local vigilante bully boys. They were Levites, from the priestly tribe, who had been religious trained. So they had heard their fair whack of sermons. But they’d never heard anyone like Jesus. And standing there, listening to him had done something, it had stirred something inside them.

But what had they done with that? Well, that’s the point isn’t it? We don’t know. Later on John tells us that many priests did put their faith in Christ, but here, he leaves it hanging: will they or won’t they? Do they or don't they? Because which is going to sway them more - pressure from others, or the draw of Christ?

You see, you can hear Jesus’ teaching and it do something to you. You can admire him and be inspired by him. But like them, do nothing with it. Because being impressed by him is not the same as trusting him, or coming to him for living water.

Ok, but if the officers are impressed, the Pharisees are not. Verse 47, ‘But the Pharisees answered them, “Have you also been deceived? Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.”

Now whether it’s intellectual snobbery, ‘Call yourself educated? That’s the sort of thing plebs believe’, or as CS Lewis put out, chronological snobbery, that these people 2000 years ago just believed because they were gullible toothless peasants, the argument from contempt is no stronger now than it was then, is it?

But it might still sway you. And the mocking of the elite might still block your way. Because Jesus is always counter-cultural. As Paul writes, ‘For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God… For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God’ (1 Cor 1:18-29).

And the leaders think it’s their great learning that protects them from being deceived, when in reality it’s their pride that stops them coming to the fountain of life.

Except one of them does come… or, at least starts taking tentative steps to come. The leaders say, v48, ‘Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him?’… and Nicodemus, who we met back in chapter 3, who came to Jesus at night, who Jesus described as *the* teacher of Israel, puts his hand up: v50-51, ‘Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, *and who was one of them*, said to them, “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?”’

Now, that’s not exactly a ringing endorsement, is it? ‘A man should not be condemned unheard, and untried.’ When you could say that about a thief or a murderer - thanks Nicodemus. And yet, from what has gone before and what’s yet to come, when Nicodemus will care for Jesus crucified and

dead body, what we see is a man taking the first steps of public faith. A man beginning to see and calling others to see, that you've got to hear Christ, you've got to learn from him, if you're not to end up on the really wrong side of history.

But of course, they just slap him down. As happens so often today when someone dares step out of line. Verse 52, 'They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee." Because when argument fails, just insult. Or cancel. And we will tolerate, all the time you're agreeing with us.

And yet, all the time, Jesus is offering water for thirsty souls, who want something better than contempt. Who want hope in place of fear, faith in place of doubt, love in place of insults, life in place of death.

So if that's what Jesus is offering, how do you come and drink?

The Response of Faith

And, firstly, you have to acknowledge your thirst. Verse 37, "If anyone thirsts…" That means you have to be dissatisfied with your life as it is now. You have to want more. You do have to come to that point of knowing that whether it's purpose or meaning in life, or closeness to God and a daily sense of his presence - this world and anything in it is not going to do it.

Secondly, you have to come to Christ by faith. Verse 38, "Whoever *believes* in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" John Calvin, the great reformer said, 'you come by faith, and not by foot'. You don't have to transport yourself back to 1st Century Jerusalem - 'if only I'd seen Jesus in the flesh', but neither do you have to go to this meeting or that meeting, this conference or that conference, this spiritual guru or that spiritual guru. Jesus says, you just have to come to him, by faith, trusting him - Jesus, I'm thirsty, you tell me to come drink of you, so fill my heart.

But thirdly, Jesus would have you get even more specific, because which Scripture is he talking about? 'As the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' Because there's no one Bible verse that says that. So does he mean Isaiah 55, in our Call to Worship: 'Come, everyone who thirsts'? Or Isaiah 58, "And you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail." Or Isaiah 12:3, "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." Or Isaiah 44:3, "I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground." Or does he mean a mashup of all those and more? Because you could add verses from Ezekiel and Joel and Amos and Zechariah, where God promises he's going to open up a fountain, and pour out a river, and the mountains will flow with wine and the stream beds with water.

Well, maybe, but remember what feast it is: Tabernacles, celebrating that in the desert - the ultimate dry place - God poured out water for his thirsty people. But how did it do it? By telling Moses to strike a rock with his staff, and Exodus 17:6, "Water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." And later in Numbers 20:11, 'And water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank.'

And now, on the day the priests poured out wine and water on the floor of the temple, on greatest day of the feast celebrating the rock being struck and water pouring out, Jesus says, 'Come to me and drink. I'm that rock, the fulfilment of this feast, the rock that will be struck and split for you so that you can drink and be satisfied.'

It's why Paul says that all along the rock in the desert was pointing to Jesus: 1 Corinthians 10:4, 'All drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them and the Rock was Christ.'

And hanging on the cross, Jesus quotes Psalm 22: 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' But in that same psalm, the psalmist says, 'I am poured out like water… My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.' (Ps 22:14-15).

And Christ poured himself out that you might be filled. He cried out, "I thirst" that your thirst might be quenched. He was laid in the dust, the desert of death, that you might drink at the fountain of life.

And at his death, the soldier struck his side not with a staff but a spear, and John, who was standing there, tells how out of his side 'at once there came blood and water.' (John 19:34). Medically, the sign of a pericardial effusion, but in reality the wine and the water, the sign of his abundant, never ending, ever flowing love for you.

Come to him, trusting that he has secured your eternal forgiveness and security, and it won't just fill your heart or satisfy your soul, it'll also give you courage. You see, Jesus is facing growing threats, but he carries on. Why? Because he knows his Father's love for him and his Father's plan for him. And Nicodemus has begun to taste the water, and he's beginning to put his head and his hand up. He's beginning to find his courage. So look to Christ, facing down the opposition out of obedience to his Father, and love for you, and you'll find your heart filled with the love and the courage to face whatever you have to face.

But you'll also find you have something better to share with others than your contempt. You see, when Jesus says that rivers of living water will flow out of our hearts, he does *not* mean that somehow we become life givers to others in any primary sense. He's talking about his life overflowing in our lives. And yet, if you come to him, and let him fill your heart, you will become a life giver in a secondary sense. You'll know that the Son of God gave himself, and poured himself out for you. And he's given you his life and his gifts and his talents and his resources - even his money, for you to steward. And what will you do with them? Keep them in? Live life as if it's for you - to consume but not to give out? No! That would be like trying to hold back a dam that's about to burst. Try and keep it in and it'll kill you. But know that out of his overflowing life he has given to you, and you'll want to love and give and serve.

And a life of courage and loving service is so much better life than a life of unbelief or contempt. So come and drink.