



Invitation to service 'I am thirsty...'

Week 2

This Sunday we celebrate St Patrick's day. When he was 16 years old Patrick was captured by Irish pirates and was enslaved for six years. It was during this time that he prayed to God and became a Christian. Patrick managed to escape his captors and after returning home felt called by God to go back to Ireland to share the gospel. The mercy he had received from God was something that he wanted to pass on to others, even the people who had trafficked him. St Patrick is famous for a holistic approach to the Christian life that integrated the spiritual and the mundane. It is fitting that today we reflect on Jesus' very simple request for a drink. It unlocks deep and profound spiritual truths.

The human body can survive for around three weeks without food but only seven days without water. Aaron Ralston was out on his own walking in Utah when he tripped and fell in such an awkward way that his arm was pinned between a rock and the edge of deep gorge. After six days trapped he recognised that he had no hope of rescue, and without water had no chance of survival, so he made the courageous decision to cut off his own arm. Ralston's story underlines the essential and irreplaceable role that water has to our bodies but also how listening to our thirst can save our lives.

Introduction

'I thirst' – what an ironic request from the man responsible for providing all the drinks at a wedding, from one who once described himself as the water of life, and who once stilled the waters of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus, who used to teach his disciples that following him meant providing for the needs of thirsty strangers, became on the cross himself a thirsty stranger in need of a drink. Jesus accepts wine vinegar from a stranger, accepting hospitality even at this loneliest of moments.

Prayer

'As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God' (Psalms 42.1–2). Lord, we come to you thirsty today – thirsty for your love, and peace, for your wisdom and grace. Thank you for all of your gifts of provision to us. Amen.

Setting the scene

Jesus frequently fed the hungry. There was once a boy who offered his meagre picnic of fish and bread, and Jesus turned it into lunch for thousands. Another time Jesus helped weary fishermen

make a record catch, or after his resurrection he prepared a breakfast barbecue on the beach for his astonished disciples.

But Jesus was more often a guest than a host, and was on the receiving end of hospitality right from birth. Arriving in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph had to rely on the kindness of a busy innkeeper for shelter. As a man, Jesus was a guest of Zacchaeus, the notorious cheating tax collector, and in various homes such as the judgmental Pharisees, Simon's mother-in-law, and Mary and Martha. In fact, Jesus was often criticised for receiving hospitality from all the 'wrong' sorts of people. But he was not ashamed. Despite the protests of onlookers, he received the welcome given him by Mary Magdalene, who poured expensive perfume on his feet. He was not ashamed of asking an outcast woman by a well in Samaria for a drink. Now, in the second of Jesus' words from the cross, Jesus again asks for a drink, this time from his enemies. And in this request of the most unlikely of people, we discover a powerful invitation to rethink the way we respond to the needs of others.

John 19.28–30

Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty.' A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Focus

Just like us, Jesus' body experienced pangs of hunger, thirst and pain. Jesus was not God pretending to be human. No, he was fully human and experienced all the same difficulties and weaknesses that we have. This is good news. It means that when we pray to him, we can be sure that he empathises with us: he understands our distresses, our tiredness, our loneliness and our physical needs.

There is something beautiful and tragic about the fact that Jesus is thirsty on the cross. The poet Thomas Pollock writes eloquently about Jesus' humanity in these words:

Jesus, in Thy thirst and pain,
While Thy wounds Thy life-blood drain,
Thirsting more our love to gain:
Hear us, holy Jesus.
Thirst for us in mercy still,
Satisfy Thy loving will:
All Thy holy work fulfil.
Hear us, holy Jesus.
May we thirst Thy love to know;
Lead us in our sin and woe
Where the healing waters flow:
Hear us, holy Jesus.
(Thomas B Pollock, 1836–1896)

There is mystery here. The one who offered others the water of life so that we would never be thirsty again, is thirsty. The one who promised to satisfy those who thirst for righteousness, is thirsty. The one who walked on water, calmed the waters of the storm, and turned water into wine, declares himself thirsty.

But even more profoundly, the one who created water, and separated the waters above from the waters below at the beginning of time, is thirsty. The one who raised others from the dead, and is now dying himself, asks someone to bring him some comfort in the form of a drink.

When Jesus brings the wine to the party it is the best wine anyone has ever tasted, but when Jesus is thirsty, humanity brings him the cheap stuff. The one who has healed thousands, fed thousands, is not given anything more than a mouthful of vinegar. It was his last request, but the response was an insult: a sponge full of bitterness.

As Jesus slowly suffocates on the cross, his body bruised and battered, his back stinging from the whipping he's received, humanity offered him the least, the leftovers, the minimum required. Perhaps we still do.

Personal reflection questions

1. Bring to mind as many incidents in Jesus' life as you can that involve food and drink. Why do you think hospitality is such an important part of Jesus' ministry?
2. Some of us find it very difficult to admit our needs and allow others to serve us. What does Jesus' willingness to ask for a drink, both on the cross and from the Samaritan woman (see John 4) teach us?
3. Hebrews 13.2 says: 'Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.' How has serving others impacted your own spiritual life?
4. How can our own feeling of thirst help remind us of the most important themes in Scripture?

Final thoughts

Sometimes it is difficult to ask others for help, but I am challenged that if even Jesus did not consider himself above asking for hospitality in his hour of need, then neither should I. Strangely his invitation is dually empowering – it challenges us to be like him and put ourselves on the receiving end occasionally. But it also challenges us to serve him, and offer hospitality generously to those around us in need.

Let us receive living water from Jesus today, and let us serve him by serving those around us in need. Freely we have received. Let us freely give.

Closing prayer

Father God, God of the poor, the thirsty, the hungry, the naked and the lonely, we are grateful for all that you have given to us through Jesus. By your Spirit, inspire us to serve those in need as if we are serving Christ himself. Give us eyes to see and hands that are quick to help. Amen.