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**Rivers of Life** (John 7: 37-39)

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If you 'google' Australian rivers, the first thing that comes up is a series of photographs running horizontally (appropriately enough) across your computer screen. They are exquisite little portraits of Australian riverscapes. There are wide, winding rivers flowing slowly through flat agricultural land, narrow mountain streams splashing over boulders and great northern rivers in red rock gorges; they are lined by river red gums or cutting through valleys or meeting the ocean. You can see a snapshot of our longest river, the Murray; one of its longest tributary, the Murrumbidgee and another of *its* tributary, our own Molonglo. You can see rivers snaking famously through cities – the Brisbane and the Yarra; through central and western Australia – the Finke and the Gascoyne; and more locally, in the Monaro and the Snowy Mountains, catch a glimpse of the Goodradigbee and the Snowy. There are politically contentious rivers and river systems – the Franklin, the Ord and the Darling. And there are ones I've never heard of – the Cudgegong and Cubrabort, the Kowrang, Wolgan and (wait for it) Bogan Rivers! Just to say their names is a kind of pleasure.

Historically, rivers tended to constitute natural boundaries between different peoples, so to cross a river was often to make a decisive transition – Caesar crossing the Rubicon, George Washington the Delaware and the people of Israel crossing over the Jordan into the promised land. Rivers also constituted a means of passage, since it was far easier to transport people and goods by water than by road – hence the paddle boats on the Murray and the Mississippi. But most importantly of all, rivers provide the means of life – fresh water – for communities settled around them, for fish and insects, birds and animals, and the vegetation and wetlands through which they course on their

way to the sea. They look like and they are the arteries and veins in the land – they make possible the connections, the flow and the flourishing of life.

Little wonder, then, they become such potent metaphors in the spiritual life. Biblically, rivers – like trees – are there at the beginning and at the end. In the second creation story in Genesis, a river is said to flow east out of Eden to water the garden and from there to break into four tributaries to water all the lands around (Gen. 2:10-14). And in the vision of creation restored in the book of Revelation, the river of life is seen to flow out directly from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 22:1-2).

The prophets too symbolise God's presence and renewal as a river. Ezekiel imagines water flowing from below the threshold of a reconstructed temple (47:1). In a vision, he is shown this river becoming deeper and deeper, and is told that when its water flows into the sea, 'the sea of stagnant waters, [its] water will become fresh'. Indeed, he goes on, 'wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live' (Ezek. 47:8-9). Amos imagines God's justice rolling down 'like waters, and [his] righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (5:24), while Isaiah proclaims that on the day of the Lord, 'With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation' (12:3).

All this imagery is in the background of our gospel passage tonight, where Jesus cries, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink'. Jesus stands in the midst of a corrupt temple, proclaiming himself as the presence of living water. And John the evangelist goes on to identify this promise of living water with the Holy Spirit which is to be poured out on believers after Jesus' resurrection and glorification. If rivers in our world are necessary means of life, then like a river, so is the Spirit of God – thirst-quenching, inflowing, transporting.

But here's a question. How are these two realms, these discourses related? I mean, the discourse about actual rivers in our environment, and the symbolic discourse

of the biblical tradition? It's struck me as we've marked this Season of Creation that it's almost impossible to speak of God and our life with God without using images and metaphors drawn from the natural world – trees, rocks, ocean, wilderness, seasons, harvest, desert, flocks, rivers. We are creatures of the earth. We know ourselves through our relationship to the earth. We know God in the same way.

But it's also struck me there can be something a bit slippery in our movement from talking about creation to our deploying it as a symbol of the spiritual life. Take what I've said so far in this reflection. On the one hand, I've talked about particular, physical rivers that flow through our land which, as well as being beautiful, often struggle under the impact of irrigation, variable flow, sedimentation, and problems of agricultural and industrial run-off. And on the other hand, I've introduced a set of river related images to talk about how we experience God. A danger seems to be that it's possible by means of this second set of images to burble on about living water in our hearts, while leaving behind the actual rivers whose existence gives rise to the symbol. But that doesn't seem quite right.

After all, how long will this imagery help us imagine our life with God, if the reality in which it's rooted is systematically compromised? How long can we be nourished by an image of the Spirit as a river of life, if many of the rivers we know are choked with weed or turning salt? And conversely, if the Spirit really is flowing in our hearts (like a river) and quickening us with the life of the Creator, then surely we cannot rest easy at the degradation of our waterways?

So what does it mean really to reverence the rivers in our land *and* the Spirit in our hearts? I wonder if what's called for is a combination of action and contemplation – or better, contemplative action.

Rivers are connectors – they traverse vast distances, coursing through many different bio-regions. What happens upstream affects what's possible downstream, as we know very well from the struggle over environmental flows in the Murray-Darling

basin. With a river system, you can't avoid the reality of our interdependence, our interrelatedness. This means that to care for our rivers properly requires us to connect to each other, to create communities of shared responsibility. At the level of action, what's encouraging is that there are efforts being made to restore the health of some of our rivers and to love them into renewed life for the benefit of all. In some localities, I think of Merri Creek in Melbourne, neighbourhood groups have formed to clear waterways of weed and litter, and revegetate their banks. On a much larger scale, there are catchment management initiatives involving multiple stakeholders and co-operative agreements between three or four state governments. Yet it's still a mixed bag. Even under such formal arrangements, some are extracting way more water than their share or depositing way too much sediment or chemical. And it's as if the connections between human communities and within human selves are inadequate to serve the joined up needs of the rivers.

The impact of this alienation in the realm of human action points us to the necessary work of contemplation, the imperative of transforming our consciousness as individuals and a society from attachment to separateness and private gain, to the lived joy of connectedness and interdependence. This is the work of the Spirit which, like a river, is a connector – the 'go-between God' in the words of John V. Taylor. To open ourselves to its vital current through prayer and receptivity to Christ, draws us into real relationship with others and changes how we're connected to the natural world. Once this has begun to happen, we simply cannot exploit the world in the same way, we cannot be unresponsive to its need. Contemplation transforms action, and it's the vocation of communities like ours to witness to this as a possibility and offer access to it.

Jesus said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water' (John 7:38). There's the 'living water' of the Spirit of God; and there's the living water of the Goodradigbee, the Murray and the Bogan. It turns out they're not such separate realms after all.