

**weaving a stronger spell: Christ in the city?**



**a three part series for Benedictus for the season of creation 2024**

Sermon 3 "the shock of the new"

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**READING:** Ezekiel 47:1-12

Then he brought me back to the door of the temple; and there was water, flowing from under the threshold of the temple toward the east, for the front of the temple faced east; the water was flowing from under the right side of the temple, south of the altar. He brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me around on the outside to the outer gateway that faces east; and there was water, running out<sup>1</sup> on the right side.

And when the man went out to the east with the line in his hand, he measured one thousand cubits, and he brought me through the waters; the water came up to my ankles. Again he measured one thousand and brought me through the waters; the water came up to my knees. Again he measured one thousand and brought me through; the water came up to my waist. Again he measured one thousand, and it was a river that I could not cross; for the water was too deep, water in which one must swim, a river that could not be crossed. He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen this?" Then he brought me and returned me to the bank of the river.

When I returned, there, along the bank of the river, were very many trees on one side and the other. Then he said to me: "This water flows toward the eastern region, goes down into the desert<sup>2</sup>, and enters the sea. When it reaches the sea, its waters are healed. And it shall be that every living thing

that moves, wherever the rivers go, will live. There will be a very great multitude of fish, because these waters go there; for they will be healed, and everything will live wherever the river goes. It shall be that fishermen will stand by it from En Gedi to En Eglaim; they will be places for spreading their nets. Their fish will be of the same kinds as the fish of the Great Sea, exceedingly many. But its swamps and marshes will not be healed; they will be given over to salt. Along the bank of the river, on this side and that, will grow all kinds of trees used for food; their leaves will not wither, and their fruit will not fail. They will bear fruit every month, because their water flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for medicine.”

*Ezekiel 47:1-12 NKJV*

1 'running out' = *pachaz: wantonness, recklessness, unbridled licence, ebullition, froth, lust, unstable*  
2 = *arabah: a steppe or desert plain, also a desert valley running S. from the Sea of Galilee*

Every so often someone goes to reddit to ask whether you should swim in the Yarra and answers include:

*Who in the right mind would swim? The Colour itself should put anyone off.*

*Its like swimming in the Themes in London. DON'T*



As of 2024 I do swim - at Deep Rock in Abbotsford – twice a week.

It took me some months to find this group who don't have public contact details.

And courage to push through the barrier to do it.

The hardest part is still standing waist deep in the cold water mustering up the will power to plunge in.

But it is a delight.

The brown is suspended clay and it is silky smooth, and it is clean enough though we don't put our heads under (or swim with open wounds).

My first swim a water dragon clambered out of the water as I arrived at the other side.

The people are blunt and fascinating.



And the view from the middle is indescribably lovely –rippling light, soft feathers covered in crystal drops, slowly moving sheets of wattle blossom.

(This is a view from the edge one morning as I don't have a camera with me in the middle!)

As I turned out I was also slowly moving to Melbourne – though I didn't know it.

I think what it took to get in is something like what it is taking to move.

And being able to do this wild type thing has meant I can in fact live back in the city.

And over to Ezekiel 47.

Exile is not the end, God will bring Israel back to their land and pour out his cleansing spirit on them.

It feels a bit cheeky to just come in here at this delightful bit.

As it is preceded by chapter on painstaking chapter describing the pattern of a new temple.

The temple matters because it is where the living water comes *from*.

The pattern of temple life - the orders and rituals of a religious community -including this one - precedes this reading .

And - because we too are temples where God dwells –our private prayer life before God also precedes this reading.

But the routines are only a container round an empty space.

They are for life only if the living God comes into their midst.

In Ezekiel 43 God does come, the cherubim chariot enters from the East with 'the sound of rushing water'.

And in today's reading water springs up, runs out round the alter, under the threshold and pours out and 'everything will live wherever the river goes.'

For those who prefer rivers to cherubim, this may come as something of a relief.

There are many intriguing things about this passage:

1 This the complete opposite of the bad shepherds who pillage the commons for themselves.

The temple is needed.

But it is *for* life outside itself -this newness is downstream – in both place and time.

If we have anything not God at the centre of our temple, it will pillage the surrounds for its own flourishing – it matters to guard the space for God.

2 This is genuine newness.



The Hebrew word for the water 'running out' on the right side of the temple is pachaz.

*1 'running out' = pachaz: bubble up, wantonness, recklessness, unbridled licence, ebullition, froth, lust, unstable*

It is a strange word – it is almost -too much alive.

There is something.... dangerous about it.

Something of this is captured in the conversation between Jesus and Pilate in John 18 where you get a palpable feel what it is like to encounter the sheer life force that is Jesus.

Pilate is attracted and repelled and in the end fobs Jesus off with 'what is truth'.

*Pilate seemed to mean a truth that was narrow and particular. Jesus was referring to a truth that was overpoweringly different: as different, Polybius had once said, as when a galley-rower, trained on skeleton ships on dry land, suddenly felt in the live ocean the pull of the oar and the craft's response.*

*Ann Wroe*

*Pilate: The Biography of an Invented Man*

Newness – real newness - is risky.

In the book of Numbers the children of Israel are roaming around the wilderness failing to be ready to enter the promised land.

In Chapter 16 there are struggles around temple leadership and a sort of battle of the bronze censers - God kills 250 dodgy priests with fire and the melted censers are hammered into coverings for the altar. The people object and there is a plague and only Moses' intervention stops it spreading further.

So a lot.

Chapter 17 suddenly turns to what seems a much gentler solution to the leadership question, the 12 wooden staffs of the leaders of the tribes are left before the ark overnight.

The next morning the staff of Aaron, the true priest, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds.

The people are poleaxed by it.

They powered through the fiery smiting earlier- but now they say in what reads like a panic "We will die! We are lost, we are all lost! Anyone who even comes near the tabernacle of the Lord will die. Are we all going to die?"

I like that the power that comes through a holy leader is the sort of power that causes a dry stick to blossom.

But there is something – astonishing – terrifying even- about the power to bring life from death.

3 This new life costs.

*A man once visited Tiberius, broke a crystal goblet and put it together again by passing his hands over it; Tiberius, horrified that he could not control this, had the man killed.*

*Ann Wroe*

*Pilate: The Biography of an Invented Man*

In John's Gospel the moment where the water bubbles out of the temple is the spear in the side of the crucified Jesus – and water and blood flow out.

But it costs those who follow him too.

The prophet Ezekiel has already suffered much in his body, and in his commission to speak a difficult truth.

And what of this point where he finds himself in water in which one must swim.

Hebrew people didn't swim.

In their frame bodies of water – rivers, seas and lakes – carried the risk of chaos, the undoing of ordered life.

Rivers often need to be crossed but it is perilous.

Dragons lurk in rivers in Hebrew Scripture.



There is one other Deborah Halpern statue by the river in town and it is this- Ophelia – on Southbank – a cheeky choice as she drowned in a muddy stream.

I think for Ezekiel this was a moment of grave risk.

But it is at this point he is asked:

Son of man, have you seen this?"

Seen what? Why now?

And then he is brought to the bank.

There are much less – full on – cleansing rituals going on all the time far back in the temple upstream.

But this immersion in a wild river is not a one off.

Naaman had to do it. John the Baptist made such a habit of doing it that he is named for it. And Jesus chose it.

What does it mean if baptism is a bit less of a polite ritual and a bit more like being rescued from near drowning in a crocodile infested stream (to leap to Top End imagery for a moment)?

5 Christ isn't all newness and rushing water.

Christ is a rock as well as a stream.

The temple rituals continue day after day.

And there is a quiet regularity to the presence of God in the world *outside*.

The river is for the trees, the leaves, the fruit & the fish.

Who are as they are as they are in their cycles of life.

And so we are not poleaxed every spring when the trees blossom, though perhaps, perhaps we should be.

6 There is mad variety in the holy geography of God.

Post Christ the temple is no longer one building in one place – small circles close to the ground right across the globe and the astonishing variety of ways this can be done.

But there is also God action outside the temple - the river, the angel like figure bringing the prophet down it, the two banks which don't become one bank, all kinds of trees, exceedingly many fish.

And I would suggest the full gamut of other creatures one might expect according to the particular place.

There are limits.

Things are what they are and not another thing, the river runs between its banks – and some things are competitive say off-lead dogs and platypus on the low banks.

But once those are sorted – the massive diversity of life held by the river is complementary not competitive.

This reading warns strongly against gaming God for one function or one life form.

7 Even the bringing of life is within limits.

You might think you would want everything to live.

But the marshes and the swamps – you could say the billabongs - are left for salt.



The Billabongs of the Yarra have an exquisite beauty.

The stillness is needed for its own life – eels grow up in billabongs.

Something in this reminds me of Simone Weil who very carefully discerned that she could not join a church.

It reminds me of myself – I am chronically ill and I am not healed – perhaps I am left for salt as it were.

It also reminds me of things I heard when I lived up North:



*...my grandfather taught me how to think about relationships by showing me places. He showed me where the creeks and rivers swirl into the sea. The fresh water meets the salt, the different worlds of ocean and river are mixing together. ...The river is the river and the sea is the sea. Salt water and fresh, two separate domains. Each has its own complex patterns, origins, stories. Even though they come together they will always exist in their own right. My hopes for reconciliation are like that.*

*Patrick Dodson  
Reconciliation at the Crossroads 1996*

The colonial mindset is very totalising, and so too our concepts of goodness.

We get rid of marshes.

And we lose much life.

8 I want to circle back to the tranquil trees on either side and this little prophet immersed in the river.

Why not just take him on a stroll down the bank?

What sort of seeing is this?

I don't think Ezekiel understood what was happening in the middle of the river.

But he remembered it, he wrote it down, and now we can fail to completely understand it thousands of years later.



It is perhaps a bit like Jesus washing his disciples feet in John 13, a gentler sort of dirty water experience, where he said ' you do not understand what I am doing now but later you will understand'.

Or Jesus again in John 9 using spit mixed with mud on the eyes of the blind man and then sending him off to wash in the pool of Siloam.

You do the actual thing in the material world and the seeing comes after.

Jesus is not one big right idea that can be abstracted from our experience in the physical reality.

The life comes from the actual presence of Christ.

### CONCLUSION



When we connect to Christ in place his spirit lights everything up and so we can – again - live immersed in an enchanted world.

And so reading creation back into our theology is one of the most exciting tasks of our time.

But it is unsettling work and we haven't sorted out how to stably hold it while dealing with the tensions that inevitably arise.

This year two Indigenous theological colleges who did this sort of work have gone under.

These sermons are the bubbling up of my attempts – it is me coming at it at it with the best I know but my way is— understatement – not everyone's way- we need all the ways and all the people working together in all the places.

It is risky, but it is the living edge and it is one of the most exciting things I know.

Dear God

We are grateful for this country  
its springs and rivers  
the water poured out  
for all that lives here  
bringing forth the beauty and the wonder and the particularity of our places

We grieve at the state of our waterways  
the pollution and rubbish  
the water stolen  
the life that depends on them sick and dying.  
They speak truly to us of the state of our hearts  
may we listen, and learn,  
and restore and in doing so be restored.

We are grateful for this church  
a coming together across difference  
unique to this place  
and beloved  
for the life it has been, and is, and will be.

We pray for each one of us  
where we are tired and frazzled, spent and empty  
may springs of living water  
rise up in our hearts

We pray for our meeting together  
the love and the struggling  
the wisdom and the not knowing  
the difficulty of holding connection in a fracturing world  
may springs of living water

rise up in our churches

We pray for  
for ears to hear  
the trickle of water  
that runs round our altars and under our thresholds  
and flows out through all that is dry or despoiled  
*for they will be healed, and everything will live wherever the river goes.*

We pray  
those who go ahead  
prophets and artists, visionaries and poets,  
those at risk of drowning in the rush of your spirit  
for courage to speak and courage to hear  
their wild and difficult message of hope  
*for they will be healed, and everything will live wherever the river goes.*

We pray for right difference  
all kinds of trees  
every sort of fish  
We pray for good boundaries and borders  
the need for both banks  
and the humility to leave marshes for salt  
to live well amidst all that is not us  
*for they will be healed, and everything will live wherever the river goes.*

Let us move at the speed of your spirit  
wait in stillness until it comes  
trust in the smallness of its starting  
and keep faith in the turbulence when it runs swift and deep  
Let us follow it wherever it leads us  
*for they will be healed, and everything will live wherever the river goes.*

Amen.

*Prayer by Celia Kemp, 2024*