

March 8th 2026

**10.30am Holy Communion St Peter and St Paul,
Langham**

Exodus 17, 1-7, Romans 5.1-11, John 4.5-42

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

The gospel reading we have just heard centres around a conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. As ever in John's gospel it is quite a complicated reading with several layers of meaning and a full exposition could detain us here for a considerable while. So today I want to concentrate on just a small part of the conversation. Jesus asks for a drink from a very old well, traditionally described as being first dug by Jacob a millennium before. This well would have been fed by groundwater in an underground aquifer that would have itself been fed by the rains that fell on the surrounding hills and mountains. The water was very clean and pure, but its flow would have been so slow as to be indiscernible. In the conversation that follows, we read

Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.'

It seems to me clear from the reading that she really didn't know what Jesus was talking about, and it is likely she was assuming that he was referring to flowing water, such as that in a stream perhaps. Jesus went on to say

Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

This seems to have left the woman quite mystified. What on earth was he talking about. A few chapters later in John's gospel, the author gives us an explanation from some words of Jesus spoken during a festival in Jerusalem.

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."' Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.'

So it seems that Jesus, when talking about “living water” was referring to the Holy Spirit using an image that was first used by the prophet Jeremiah 600 years before, albeit in a rather negative sense. He wrote, of the nation of Israel

for they have forsaken the fountain of living water, the Lord

The image of the Holy Spirit as living water is a powerful one. Water was, and indeed is, one of the essential of life, and we are here given the picture of the Holy Spirit as the one who sustains and refreshes us in our spiritual journey. And if we look elsewhere in scripture we find this image expanded. At Jesus’ baptism in the waters of the Jordan, the Spirit came on him, and in the New Testament, baptism in water is often seen as a symbol of the cleansing of our sins and our imperfections by the Holy Spirit. And in the visions of another John in the book of Revelation we read of the river of the water of life that flows from the throne of God, that becomes deeper the further it flows, and that nourishes the ground along its banks, so that trees grow and produce fruit. A wonderful picture of the “living water”, the Holy Spirit, not just sustaining life, but giving new and vibrant life to those who drink it. In the creed in a few moments we will proclaim our faith in God the Holy Spirit “the Lord, the giver of life” and as we do so we can perhaps hold that image of “living water” in our minds.

Another related image of the Holy Spirit in scripture is that of the wind. Right at the start of the bible we read that

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

The phrase “a wind from God” could equally well be translated as “the Spirit of God”. The Holy Spirit, present at the act of creation. In the famous vision of the Valley of the dry bones in Ezekiel we read.

‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live

The word for breath could again equally well be translated as wind or spirit. And again in John’s gospel, from last week’s reading

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’

The Spirit who brings order to chaos, the life giving Spirit, unpredictable Spirit, who can blow us into new ways to do God’s work.

Now these two symbols of wind and water are actually for me quite personal, as I have spent my life as an academic teaching and researching into fluid mechanics – how water and wind move around. And in the real physical world, we can see how water is directed

and treated to sustain life, and how for many, being close to water, be it at the coast, or by a river, or even by a canal, can be a source of peace and joy. And the wind too can be tamed and directed and used to ventilate our homes, and to provide more or less unlimited power to sustain life.

But in our real world, there is a darker side to both water and wind, and sometimes to their combination. Heavy rains and high winds can bring uncontrollable and almost unimaginable damage and destruction. We see this more and more often as the effects of a changing climate kick in. It has been predicted for several decades now that we will see hotter, drier summers and warmer wetter winters with more storms, and this seems to be fast becoming our new normal reality.

So there is perhaps a darker side to these biblical images of wind and water. We find this in scripture itself. The depths of the sea are often taken as a symbol of chaos, a place of demons and sea monsters. Indeed in that passage at the start of Genesis the Spirit of God moves over the face of the waters – the word for waters here implying formless chaos.

a wind from God swept over the face of the waters

And the destruction wrought by strong winds is often seen as a metaphor for human wickedness, and the judgement of God. From Isaiah

The nations roar like the roaring of many waters, but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away, chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind and whirling dust before the storm.

In the psalms we read of the psalmists being overwhelmed by the deep waters. From Psalm 69

I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.

Pictures then perhaps of the darker parts of our lives, where things seem to be out of control, where there is darkness and chaos.

So water and wind are somewhat ambiguous images of the Holy Spirit. But there is something in this ambiguity that is I think important. Firstly, that even when things seem to be falling apart, our lives are descending into chaos, then God the Holy Spirit is still there with us, the sound of the living water can still be heard through the torrents, the voice of God can still be heard through the tempest. In the story of Job, we read that after all the disasters that befell him, all the fruitless arguments of his friends, when there seemed no reason at all for what had befallen him,

the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind

And when the disciples feared for their lives as a storm swept across Galilee and threatened to overwhelm them, Jesus

rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.

Secondly, in some way, the raging waves and the shattering winds are as valid an image of the Holy Spirit, as the quietly flowing waters, or the gentle breath of wind and the former can quickly change into the latter. What I am trying to say is that even when events seem to overwhelm us, we can, perhaps only in retrospect, see the Spirit working through them. A hard truth to accept, but one that seems to accord with many folk's experience.

So water and wind are powerful images of the working of the Holy Spirit in the world and in our lives. I have suggested a few ways of understanding these images, but these only scratch the surface of their significance and importance. These images are something to be thought on and mulled over day by day and week by week, to understand their depths of meaning inherent in these images that are important to each one of us. So hold onto them in the coming days, and see what God says to you about how he can be understood in the water and the wind.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen