Waters of

Robin Kearns explains why in this Year of Mercy giving drink to the thirsty is not enough. Being merciful means to act in the defence of the quality of water.

In this Year of Mercy, what is the place of water in our prayer, our relationships, our being-in-the-world? Most literally, along with air, water is a co-equally critical requirement of sustaining life. Without water all creatures suffer, then die. In short, water is a fundamental physiological need. The simple act of giving water to the thirsty is hence a basic act of mercy. These are changing times, when drought is at the door of many. When the availability and purity of water is under threat, we are surely called to be merciful to others as well as to the planet that provides.

Pollution Degrades Water Symbol

The significance of water flows through our lives. Beyond sustaining our bodies, it fulfils higher order purposes. It meets our social needs, encouraging playfulness (watch families on a beach) and our sense of the aesthetic (consider fountains and waterfalls). For us on faith journeys, water is also deeply sacramental and symbolic.

At a workshop on the shores of Lake Erie, I recall Thomas Berry pointing to the murky waters saying: "If we allow waterways to become polluted, our understanding of baptism becomes degraded". Berry was saying the power of the symbol is sustained by the integrity of the elements we experience. Offering water to the thirsty is but the beginning of mercy; we are also called to act in defence of the quality of water.

Outcry Against Lake Pollution

Recently, three images in the media have spoken to the precarious state of fresh water in New Zealand.

First, in January we saw a herd of cattle standing in Lake Taylor, Canterbury. That the stock were owned by two wealthy New Zealanders added to the outrage and prompted a complaint to Environment Canterbury. Defecating farm animals and bodies of fresh water are no longer an acceptable mix and the photograph struck a raw nerve. Farming has long been our country's sacred cow and to question its practices once seemed tantamount to treason. Now public opinion is questioning the greater good. We can no longer "go with the flow" and accept farming as a priority over water quality.

Students March for Swimmable Water

Second, in March students marched in Wellington presenting a petition of 13,000 signatures calling for all freshwater in our country to be swimmable. A Gisborne mother brought water from her local rivers and lakes to pour on Parliament's steps and wept as she spoke of water quality for future generations.

Protests Against Bottling Water

Third, in April it was revealed that the sale of land in water-needy Ashburton came with a consent to extract 1.4 billion litres of artesian water each year. That this water would be bottled and exported added to a sense of dismay among commentators. But is the action of multinational corporations extracting and bottling water any more morally questionable than large-scale irrigation for dairying in otherwise arid parts of our country?

Unacceptable Bottom Lines

Forest and Bird report that more than half of our lowland lakes and rivers are now polluted—unsafe for people and the species they support. The government is proposing "wadeable" and "boatable" as water quality "bottom-lines". Do we want rivers and lakes that are safe only to *wade* in?

Mercy

What about to swim in, to play in, to gather watercress from? "Boatable"? What about *potable*? Let's lift the bar and promote the contention that our waterways must have the capacity to support an acceptable standard of ecological health and meet a range of human needs.

One problem is that a regional approach to fresh water management sees large-scale slabs of our political landscape in charge of water policy. What about the local? One of Tom Berry's enduring concerns was a bio-regional consciousness. If polluting waterways is a sin of commission, then surely failing to appreciate acutely the essential value of water is a sin of omission in these morally arid times.

Know our Local Water

A useful environmental exercise in this Year of Mercy might therefore be to think about water within our local "catchment". We could discuss around the dinner table: where does rainfall flow to within our neighbourhood? Where is our closest stream? Where does it ultimately exit to the sea? What life does it support? How can we support its health? We need to challenge ourselves to take a fresh approach to water; to re-appreciate the blessing that it is, to feel it and taste it anew. Perhaps we might walk out without an umbrella in the next shower of rain as if a drought had broken, as if our body and being had forgotten the blessing of being wet.

Experience of Thirst

On the Cross, Jesus said: "I thirst". Most literally, to thirst is to feel the body crying out to be quenched and maintain life. But at a metaphorical level, to thirst is also to yearn for something as yet unattainable. We thirst for justice, community, acceptance . . . and for God. The psalmist sings: "My soul thirsts for You . . . as in a dry and weary land where there is no water." It is time also to thirst for purer waters.

In our mostly moist and well-watered land, it's only in summer drought that we find images that speak to the psalmist's God who promises streams in the desert. Will this always be the case? In his soulful song of water crisis, Dave Dobbyn sings:

"Where you gonna be when the river don't run no more?
Who you gonna run to when the desert's at your door
When there isn't any more?
(When the Water Runs Out. 2008).

What Could We Thirst For?

Given our taken-for-granted presumption of drinkable water and water on tap for daily needs, what should we thirst for?

> *"If we allow waterways to become polluted, our understanding of baptism becomes degraded".*
>
> *– Thomas Berry*

Surely we want a land in which rivers flow clean and support species, so the intrinsic value of all life is upheld. To lose that thirst is to lose our passion for a just and merciful world in which, as Tom Berry said, the water of baptism is a potent symbol. If we are not confronted by water distinguished by clarity, purity and liveliness, baptism, itself, will be reduced to a token symbol dispensed from the same plastic containers that are filled and exported from our springs by corporations.

Next time we are walking in the bush, will we feel confident to descend to hands and knees and cup to our mouth handfuls of water, filtered by roots and moss? Sadly, we must seek out increasingly remote places to engage in this primal act of oneness with water. Yet, to engage in such an act is to drink in the vitality of our watery land and be in prayerful, merciful solidarity with all those for whom the desert is truly at their door. ■

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