

Views from the Pews Living water

If you climb to the top of the Cathedral tower you will be able to see the mighty Waikato River, bringer of abundant hydro-electric power, source of drinking water, a once and future highway, sacred to the Iwi of its banks, and symbol of this city. It is also a barrier between East and West; bridge-building takes up a lot of time and public resources. Its very presence may also lead to complacency about the availability of water itself. The river and its water seem permanent.

Part of last week's Gospel however reminds us that we are probably outliers. John 4; 7-16 is an object lesson in the value of water and the consequences of its scarcity. The well at which Jesus and the Samaritan wife met has iconic qualities, meaningful to all cultures and faiths that drew water there. Both parties identify the well as Jacob's. Jacob used it as did his sons and (crucially) his livestock.

Living where we do, it is easy to forget that the Bible lands may have been chronically short of water. This would explain the cultural and economic importance of wells. Water features regularly, and so is a readily available metaphor for Jesus when He wants to talk about value. Rivers, lakes and wells pop up everywhere, both as sources of life (see Galilee's importance as a protein source), and as potential barriers, hence Moses' parting of the Red Sea. And today we still use water for baptism, purification and healing. This is precisely because of its Biblical meaning and value.

Therefore, we may be well placed to lead what some suspect is an overdue discussion about water in this country. Sometimes there is too much of it. Sometimes there is too little. We are already seeing competition for water. All of a sudden, it is a finite resource. Our population increases. Land use changes. It may be possible to foresee a time when wells and other artificial means of water-access acquire a value approaching that to which Jesus ascribes. Awareness of water sources and their fragility is an essential Bible theme. If indeed we live in 'Godzone' there is no excuse for avoiding this issue.

And we have not even got to salt water, which doesn't get much of a look-in until Paul sets off. Salt water is still necessary, not least because it drives our weather.

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