

## Sermon Easter 6 2022

When I was doing my Bachelor's degree I was at King's College in London. The college was in the heart of London, its front on the Strand, a short walk from Trafalgar Square. But it backed on to the River Thames. In the late spring it was nice to buy an ice-cream as lunch and enjoy it, sitting on the riverside studying exam notes. Ice-creams may not be the healthiest lunch but they were nice! Rivers are special, aren't they? Don't you feel drawn to them? In these years living here I have loved to hike beside the local rivers in Hacklebarney and at the Cooper Grist Mill. I have loved going on the more strenuous hike to the water falls in Hackettstown. It's really beautiful there. Water continues flowing and going on and on. Flowing water is a wonderful evidence of God's amazing creation. You can relax beside flowing water, sing beside it, read beside it and pray beside it. On the bank of a flowing river is indeed a wonderful to pray, aware of God all around you.

In our first lesson St Paul knew rivers were special. He had been on a very long missionary journey right across Turkey (called Asia Minor in those days) and was wondering where to go next. God spoke to him through a dream experience. A man from what we call Northern Greece today begged him to go to his homeland, a boat ride away.

So, Paul with his little team went there, a boat ride across the Aegean Sea and then a journey into Northern Greece/Macedonia as it was called to the city of Philippi. Usually, Paul found the local synagogue and went there on the Sabbath. But it seems there was no synagogue in this Roman city. Well what do you do if you want to worship God and there is no church anywhere around? He went outside the city and down to the riverside, as he expected it would be a good place to pray. But he wasn't alone. Did he know that was where women would go to pray too? He found a group gathered and being full of the Holy Spirit I assume he offered to give them a message from God, to preach. It seems he was welcomed. Then an amazing thing happened. One of the group, Lydia, obviously a wealthy woman as she dealt in purple cloth, known to be expensive, was converted to Christianity. Her heart was opened and she wanted to be Baptized. What's more she was the leader of her own home (I assume no spouse was there) and so she wanted the whole household to be Baptized too. Furthermore she insisted Paul and his team should stay in her home. It sounds so strange to us, for her to invite a bunch of strange men into our homes, doesn't it? But since the invasion of the Ukraine, people are doing that. My niece in England has a home into which she had invited a Ukrainian family with two little kids to stay. Yolande from Poland told me she has a home there and has different families in the bedrooms, sharing the total space. If you have ever fostered, you understand. In fact, the foster service said a few years ago it desperately needed people as temporary foster parents, willing to take children at short notice say for a weekend or a few days until plans could be made. As you heard today, God opened Lydia's heart and Paul and his team stayed in her home.

The riverside experience that day made a great difference in the lives of Lydia and Paul. She found a new life in Christ and he had a place to stay as his home base in that city. He seemed to find good people there: his letter to the Philippians is very inspirational and uplifting. A very different experience with water was endured by a paralyzed man in our gospel today. A man said to have been sick for 38 years was lying on a mat beside the pool of water. The pool was known to have healing powers, healing available to the one who entered into it when the water was stirred up. This poor man could not get into those waters quickly; someone else always beat him to it. Jesus knew he was suffering but as you heard asked him if he wished to be healed. Are you thinking it was a silly question

because for sure he wanted to be healed? But the man did not know any other way of life other than sitting beside the pool. Once healed he would need to work and spend his life in a very different way. Jesus wanted the man to make his own decision. Do you feel God is sometimes calling you to do something or be something and you are not sure because it would change your life. Years ago I remember discussing Jesus and the Bible with someone and she said that following Jesus was a good thing to do but not something she would want to give her whole life to doing. I remember saying, "That is where we are different." As the Gospel told us, Jesus healed this man, and he was able to stand up and roll up his mat and walk away. But the last verse of this reading let's us realize this was not the end of the story because it was a Sabbath Day; Jesus was about to be highly criticized by the religious leaders for "working" on the Sabbath. But that's for another day. The man was healed and he left the poolside, his home base for so many years.

Healing, God's healing love is really needed in our nation today. We are reeling with the two mass shootings last weekend. Ten black people singled out and shot in Buffalo and ten people killed in Chicago. It is so sickening to hear such news. Rivers of blood are not the sort of rivers God intended for us to experience. Gun violence and gun laws are political questions, you have your own thoughts of what we can do about mass shootings, but I do not think we have a good solution in our nation yet as mass shootings occur so frequently. We are all horrified but more than our thoughts and prayers are needed to prevent them occurring

Rivers can be dangerous too, when they swell they flood and people caught in the swelling waters can drown. They are not always life giving. Recent pictures of India show whole areas flooded by swollen rivers. One of the world's largest rivers, the Brahmaputra, which flows into India and neighboring Bangladesh from Tibet, burst its banks in Assam over the past three days, inundating more than 1,900 villages. The report said 10 people are dead and 700,000 people adversely affected.

One more type of river is described today. Our reading from the book of Revelation, the vision John received from God includes a river. John wrote that the angel of God showed him the "river of the water of life." This river was as bright as crystal and flowed from God's throne through the new city of God. The tree of life was on either side of the river, producing fruit each month and its leaves were for the healing of the nations. What a beautiful vision. I am sure you want to think of John seeing that and feeling God was showing him what was to come. It did not say how those leaves were to be used, how their healing power was to be distributed. But as a vision of heaven, it sounded beautiful. With the world so challenged, the climate is almost out of control reminding us our planet earth will not be a good place to live for future generations, there are nations waging war, and civil war in many places. Hunger and starvation are rampant in the world; covid is again getting out of control here and in much of the world. We are no longer a world which is the good place God created it to be. Yes, we need healing, and we need to offer healing in all the ways we can. That river of the water of life is for each of you. It offers water for healing, water to share, good water.

In a few minutes I will be Baptizing Izzy in water, warm water too. This is holy water for cleansing of the heart, water as a gift from God like the river of the water of life. Jesus offered living water to a foreign woman who was overjoyed to be offered it (John: 4.) Jesus himself was Baptized. He entered the River Jordan with John the Baptist. He experienced the voice of God speaking to him as he rose from the water. The voice proclaimed, "This is my son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased." The water of Jesus' Baptism was living water, the river flowing from its rising. I will bless the water in

the font, asking God to make it holy water. It will be holy, to signify Izzy being adopted into the family of God. Izzy has always been special to God, one of God's children. But today we celebrate he is officially part of this wonderful and huge family.

This wonderful and huge family of God is called to share healing water with everyone. Each of you can do this. You are a vessel for God and can be full of the water of life, your life lived for God.

May this be so today and every day. Amen