

Expecting Rivers | LIVING WATER | January 26, 2020

John 7.37-39

What would you recommend?

- I'm one of those people who have been accused of always playing it safe when it comes to food choices. You know the type. When ordering at a restaurant it's always avocado rolls, bacon burgers, predictable soups, or the ever-faithful *Honda Civic* of meals, chicken strips and fries. I remember one visit with some friends to a Mexican restaurant some years ago and ordering what I read on the menu as the "Mexican sandwich", and though I'm sure some people like Mexican sandwiches for appetizing reasons, I had truthfully only ordered one because I was simply comforted by the familiar word "sandwich". My friends have never let me live it down. On many an evening around a table they've asked, "What are you having tonight, Luke? I don't see a Mexican sandwich on the menu." In the world of the culinary arts some of us have "risk averse" palates. We think we know what we like, and we never deviate, never explore. Knowing just what to expect is the name of the game. That said, I've gotten a little braver over the years, taking a few more risks, expecting to be pleasantly surprised now and then. I'm proud to say that on one or two occasions more recently I've even asked a server "what would you recommend?" It's getting to become pretty risky business.
- "What would you recommend? What's available that I've yet to taste and enjoy, maybe what I don't even know that I'd like or even need?" These aren't bad questions to ask a server at a restaurant. And I'd also venture these aren't bad questions to put to God in prayer either, as prayer is the very place where our *risk aversion* is often most evident. But is playing it safe what life with God is about? Are comfort and control the fruit of a growing faith? "What would you recommend? What's on offer that I could use more of?", these are questions that stretch us in our risk-aversion with God.

God's glory seen in Jesus

- As we've already seen, there's a lot going on John chapter 7. We've noted the reality of human thirst, and the unique and wide-open invitation Jesus gives for *everyone* to find life and refreshment through him. But along with the importance of honestly hearing Jesus' invitation ourselves, we could also notice St. John's vision of Jesus' life and work from a wider perspective. John writes: "*When he (Jesus) said 'living water,' he was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in him. But the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus had not yet entered into his glory.*" Now, something we should notice is that when John mentions "Jesus entering his glory", no doubt somewhat mysterious language to many of us, he's writing in a kind of short hand, summing up the foundations of the Christian faith. What John means by "Jesus entering his glory", the story he's telling with those few words, goes something like this: True humanity was not only fleshed out by Jesus' example, but humanity itself and the world beyond has been re-animated through Christ. When Jesus was "glorified" in John's language, meaning "lifted up" on the cross, God's accurate character was seen through Jesus' self-sacrifice, and this accomplished something unique in history.
- So when we think about Jesus' on the cross, as John might say "in all his glory", we should notice at *least* two things. First, that the compassion, humility and self-sacrifice of a crucified Jesus shows us what God is really like; in other words the cross put God's *glory or character* on full display. And second, somehow, mysteriously, Jesus' self-sacrifice gave humans forgiveness when we were previously in debt, has made us alive when we were previously dead. Believing in or trusting Christ, *resuscitates* us. That's a very simplistic summation of what Jesus life, death and resurrection achieved, but that's essentially what John means when he talks about Jesus "entering his glory". And this is what baptism celebrates. At baptism we're saying that we've come to trust God because Jesus has made God's love clear to us, and we're entrusting ourselves to God because we think Jesus' death and resurrection has done something for us that we

couldn't do for ourselves. When we pop up out of the water at baptism and take that first breath, we are depicting and remembering our *resuscitation* in Christ.

God's Spirit in Excess

- But what John also sums up in these few words is what *else is made possible* through Jesus' death and resurrection. Forgiveness, resuscitation, new life, certainly, but also the liberal giving of the Holy Spirit to everyone who trusts Jesus; God's gushing presence filling our entire beings and lives. This is where Jesus' words elsewhere in John's gospel are helpful. In John 16 Jesus tells his disciples that after his death and resurrection he won't be with them as they had previously known him. Jesus says that's he's going, and that he is sending his Spirit to everyone who trusts him. And Jesus even goes so far as to say that it's better that he's not physically with his disciples following his resurrection, because the Spirit will be with them all the time, not just through *his* physical, bodily life, but rushing in and through the lives of his *followers*. Wrapping our heads around this can be a little tricky, but what Jesus' seems to mean is that his disciples shouldn't expect Jesus' physical presence to be the only housing of God's life and action in the world long term, but that God's Spirit will be poured in excess into the world through the lives of Jesus' followers. In other words, every Christian becomes themselves a temple of Jesus' Spirit; we are each housing God's Spirit within us.
- With that in mind, we come back to John 7 and to Jesus' language about rivers. The expectation is that God's Spirit, what we are housing, is plentifully poured out and at work within the life of a Christian. This sense of abundance of God's Spirit, what comes through in the image of fresh rushing water, is then what each follower of Jesus can anticipate and enjoy. John's got some clever ways of helping depict this, for example he tells us that at Jesus' crucifixion it's blood and water that pours from his body. What's John saying with that picture? He's saying that Jesus' death wasn't just about *debt cancellation*, but about *life provision*. Water means life. John's pointing to Jesus and saying, "this is the person from which all life flows". Here is where the image of baptism becomes helpful for us. Just as baptism in water depicts our moving from death to life, the New Testament writers speak of a

“baptism in the Spirit”. There is this sense that after we’ve chosen to follow Jesus we are to expect and invite, a baptism, a filling and continual re-filling by God’s Spirit. Life in Spirit is an *immersive* reality. That’s why a friend ours, who happens to be an expert in John’s gospel, likes to say that when reading the Jesus story in the New Testament, we’ve got to come to grips with the fact that there’s more to being a Christian than just having our sins forgiven. In other words, a robust life of faith is about celebrating the forgiveness we’ve received because of Jesus, of course, but it’s also living in the reality that God’s Spirit is within us and is constantly being pouring out, always available in excess *because* of Jesus. This fuels our purpose as humans, and blesses the worlds we inhabit each day. So what we hear on John’s gospel is that through Jesus’ death and resurrection, God didn’t make available just a *little bit* of new life, a trickle of a stream, but *loads* of new life, “rivers of living water”! You get same idea from Luke’s gospel, that something really has broken open and is gushing out because of Jesus, not only the forgiveness of sins, but the dynamic life of God’s Spirit at work in the world in a fresh way. New life, new creation.

- So when we believe, or trust, Jesus we receive forgiveness, but we can also expect to receive a life full of God’s life, full of God’s presence, a baptism in and continual filling of God’s Spirit. We can expect rivers.

MOVE

What would you recommend?

- That’s why, weirdly, I began by talking about Mexican sandwiches. It seems that in choosing to follow Jesus and receiving this *resuscitation*, his new life, we’re not to expect a stingy gift, or a leaky faucet kind of relationship with God. We’re to expect torrents of God’s life rushing through our daily lives. Now let’s be clear, all of this isn’t to say that a genuine life of faith is only one which looks always bubbly, vibrant, annoyingly smiley. The river of God’s Spirit runs deep and wide, through suffering, grief, through slow growth, through steady faithfulness, and it runs uniquely through each of us. Faith is not about building God a kind of concrete water course for his Spirit. Rivers tend to be roomy and to make room. But it is to

say that we can expect and actively welcome *plenty of God*. The excess of this image of life-teaming water is something the New Testament writers are always pointing towards. So heaven forbid we reduce God's Spirit to a sample-size sip at the supermarket. But a little bit like my *culinary risk-aversion*, it can be very easy to become *risk-averse* as a Christian when it comes God's Spirit. Before long we can become a little comfortable with Jesus at arms-length, taste-testing grace every now and then when we know we need it, drying up between waterings. As my friend says, we can get really good at having our sins forgiven, but does all this life renewing, rushing water stuff about Jesus not mean that there's more to expect?

- As we shared last week, the gift of God's Spirit in excess is available to us. The question is, how available are we to God? Are we growing in our *risk aversion* or in our trust? We needn't make up rules, we needn't try and fit into boxes, but only to step further into our trust in who Jesus is and what he made possible. And in doing so we can expect rivers. As we see in the gospels when Jesus' feeds the thousands, God always makes enough for leftovers. God's not a river we'll ever drain dry. "What would you recommend? What's available that I've yet to taste and enjoy? What have you got for me that I don't even know that I'd like or even need?" Good questions in Mexican restaurants when we're hungry. Great questions in prayer when we're thirsty.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Jesus' cross tell us about God's glory?
2. What does being filled with God's Spirit look like?
3. What are ways we build God a kind of concrete water course to run in? What's important about letting God be God when it comes to our discussion and experience of the Holy Spirit?