

An invitation to the thirsty

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On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.
(John 7.37-39)

Introduction

These words contain a wonderful invitation to everyone who is spiritually thirsty to come to Jesus and drink. He promises that those who come to him will not only have their thirst quenched, but will themselves become a source of blessing to others, because the Holy Spirit who will satisfy them will flow out through them to others around them.

As we think about these verses, I want us to do so under the following headings:

To whom is the invitation addressed?

What is Jesus calling us to do?

What Jesus will give those who come to him.

1. To whom is the invitation addressed?

We see that Jesus issued his invitation publicly, to all and sundry. There had been a Jewish festival which lasted eight days. A large number of people had come up to Jerusalem from the surrounding towns. On the last and greatest day of this festival, when there would have been the most people present, Jesus stood up, raised his voice, and said "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink". Anyone! All, whatever their background, whatever they had done in the past, whether they had been good or bad, religious or non-religious, Jesus invited them to come to him and drink. And the invitation still stands. Not long after he spoke these words Jesus died on the Cross, and then was raised to life again, appeared to many people, and then went back up to heaven. He has now poured out his Holy Spirit, and he is still inviting people to come to him and drink. He is calling you today through this booklet.

There is only one qualification: you must be thirsty. You must be aware of your need of spiritual blessing. If you consider yourself to be quite OK in your life, without any need of spiritual blessing, then, for the time being at least, until you see your need, Jesus will do nothing for you. But if you are aware of the need for spiritual blessing in your life, then come to him and receive from him, and you will know the deep satisfaction that he gives.

What sort of needs are implied by the term "thirsty"? Let me mention a few:

The need to know forgiveness.

The need to know peace.

The need for relief from weariness

The need to overcome sin.

The need to be loved.

Now I want to reinforce what I said just now, that Jesus says "if anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink." It makes no difference who you are. If you are thirsty, he is calling you. Maybe up to this point you have been an atheist. You have had no regard for God. The only time Jesus' name has crossed your lips has been as a swear word. No matter, if you are aware of your need, Jesus is calling you, and if you will come he will not hold against you what you have done before. Or maybe you have been a very religious person, going to a church each Sunday, living an outwardly respectable life. Yet, inside you know that it is a sham. You know that the reality is that you do not know Christ as your own Saviour. It makes no difference. Even if up till now you have been a complete hypocrite, if you are aware of your need, Jesus is calling you now. Then again, maybe you are a true Christian. You have accepted Christ as your Saviour, but your life has become dry. You have made the mistake of trying to find satisfaction in this world rather than in Christ. Your first love has all but evaporated. It is a long time since you last properly read the Bible and prayed alone. You feel doubly guilty because you know that God has done so much for you, and you have treated him so badly by backsliding. But by saying "if anyone" Jesus includes the backslider. Are you thirsty? Then come to him, whoever you are.

2. What Jesus calls us to do

You will see that Jesus calls us to do two things: to come to him, and to "drink". Let us consider these two things.

1) Come to Jesus

Jesus urges us to come to him. The wonderful thing is that Jesus is not far from any one of us. Before he went up to heaven and poured out the Holy Spirit upon the world, only those few people who were physically close to Jesus could

come to him. But now he is close to each one of us by the Holy Spirit. He is present in a special way when a true church meets together, because he said that "where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them" (Matthew 18.20). But when you go home he will still be there. If you go to your bedroom and kneel down beside your bed, he will be right there to hear what you have to say.

Coming to Jesus must involve praying to him. Tell him your needs. Tell him about your concerns, your fears, your sins, your sense of being alone and unloved, your weariness. Bring all these things to him. Jesus says in another place something similar to this saying. He says

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)

We need to come to Jesus, and we need to unburden ourselves of all those burdens that we have placed on ourselves. We need to give those burdens over to him, and receive from him his yoke instead, which is easy, and take his burden upon ourselves, which is light. Peter says something similar again "Cast all your anxiety upon him, for he cares for you" (1 Peter 5.7).

2) Drink

The other thing Jesus tells us to do is to "drink". What does this mean? It means that we receive into ourselves what he has done for us. We must "absorb" into our very souls the blessings that he has purchased for us on the Cross. So many stop short of properly receiving what Jesus has done. Yes, they believe he is the Son of God. For sure, they believe that he died

on the Cross. They believe that he was raised from the dead. They believe he is coming again. They believe that his death on the Cross provided salvation for sinners. But, all too often, this is as far as it goes. Such people have what might be called an "intellectual faith", or "head knowledge". They believe the basic facts, the basic doctrines of Christianity. They believe at one level, but have not received. Those who do this have done no more than the demons do, because we know that the demons also believe the basic facts of Christianity. James says "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder" (James 1.19).

Jesus says something similar about the need to "drink" him earlier on in John's Gospel. He says "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6.54). What is he saying? That we have to engage in some sort of macabre cannibalistic feast? No. Rather that we must receive right into ourselves what he has done for us. We must appropriate his blessings and make them our own.

Let me illustrate it like this. Suppose one day there is a knock on the door and you open the door to a kindly looking gentleman whom you have never met before. He introduces himself to you, and says that he knows about you through a mutual friend. He says that he has learned, through this friend, that you are in some financial difficulty, and he would be very pleased if you were to receive a cheque from him for £10,000. He says there are no conditions attached to his gift. It is just that he has been blessed with a lot of money himself and he wants to share it with others in need. He says that the only thing is that he did not know how to spell your name, so has left the name part of the cheque blank, for you to fill in your name. So he holds the cheque to you. What do you have

to do to benefit from that gift? You have to take the cheque from him, and write your own name in it. Then you need to take it to the bank and pay it in to your account. And once the cheque has cleared, you are able to draw the money and use it to pay off your debts. Now, suppose instead of doing that you said to yourself, "That was a really nice gesture. What I am going to do is to frame that cheque and put it on the mantle piece. Then whenever I see that cheque I will remember that nice gesture of that stranger who came to my door." That sounds very noble. But there is one problem. If you do that you will never benefit from the gift. Sure, at one level you believe that you were given a cheque for £10,000. You have the evidence right before your eyes, on the mantle-shelf. But you will never have that £10,000 to spend. So it is with the Cross of Christ. You need to not just make a pretty picture of Jesus hanging on the Cross to put above your mantle piece. You need to not just believe the fact of the Cross. You need to receive into your life the blessings that flow what he did. You need to "cash in" the spiritual blessings that he purchased on that Cross. You need to, as it were, write your name against the promises of God in Scripture, and claim them as your own. You need to believe that your sins have been paid for, not just the sins of sinners in general. You need to believe that you have eternal life on account of what Jesus did, not just that Christians in general have eternal life.

3. What follows from coming to Jesus

Jesus then goes on to say what will follow if we come to him and drink. And here comes the surprise! What would you have expected him to say at this point? Something like, "Whoever believes in me will have his thirst quenched." This is of course true, and Jesus did say something very similar to that earlier on in John's Gospel, when he said "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6.38). But here Jesus

promises to do more than quench our own thirst. He promises to give us such a huge "dose" of spiritual blessing that we shall have streams of living water flowing from within us. He says, "Whoever believes in me, as the Scriptures has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." And, as John says, what he is referring to is the gift of the Holy Spirit who, from the point of when Jesus was speaking, was to be given. This gift has now been poured at Pentecost upon all true believers.

A question which arises from what Jesus says is, what Scripture was he referring to when he said "As the Scripture has said"? There has been a lot of discussion on this point. There are in fact many prophecies in the Old Testament which liken the Holy Spirit to water, and the blessings of the New Covenant to water being poured out in the desert, for example in Isaiah 35 verses 1 and 5 – 6, which say

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy....Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

To my mind, however, the prophecy which most closely predicts what Jesus is talking about is found in Ezekiel 47. In this prophecy, Ezekiel sees water coming from under the threshold of the temple. This water starts off as a small stream, and then becomes ankle deep, then knee deep, then waist deep, and ultimately becomes a river which is so deep he cannot cross it. And the effect of the water is that it brings life. A large number of trees grow on either side of the river bank. Then the water flows into the Dead Sea, which is as the name implies is dead because of its very high salt levels. When

this river reaches the Dead Sea, it causes the water in that sea to become fresh water, and large numbers of fish start to live in the Sea.

This prophecy corresponds with what Jesus promises in a number of ways. Firstly, in Ezekiel's prophecy the water flows from the temple, and the teaching of Scripture is that true believers are the temple of God. This corresponds with what Jesus says when he says that streams of living water will flow from within him who believes in him. Secondly, in Ezekiel's prophecy there is an abundant and increasing flow, which Jesus also speaks about when he talks of "streams of living water". And thirdly, it brings great blessing to all those who come into contact with it, which Jesus also says, because he calls the water that will flow from him who believes "living water".

So we see that Jesus is promising a wonderful thing if we will take up his invitation. He is saying that if we will come to him and drink, not only will our needs be satisfied through the salvation he will give us, but, because we shall receive the Holy Spirit, who will flow out through us, we shall be a source of tremendous blessing to others.

So here is a further encouragement for you to come to Christ, if you are not as yet a Christian. Not only will it do you good, but it will also make you into a source of blessing to others around you. What is the effect that you are having on others at the moment? Are you causing trouble and distress to those around you? Do you want to change? Do you want to be a source of blessing to your family, friends and neighbours? Then come to Christ and receive from him his blessing.

But as well as a promise, what Jesus says here must also be something of an implicit challenge to those of us who are

Christians already. The question that this saying of Jesus begs about your life and my life is this: are you, am I, currently the source of blessing for people around us that Jesus promised we would be? When people meet you, when they meet me, do they encounter Christ in us, through his Spirit? Is the life-giving water of the Holy Spirit pouring out through us into the desert of this world? Does the tenderness, the meekness and the gentleness of Christ show itself in your attitudes and actions? Is your life characterised by the fruit of the Holy Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control (Galatians 5.22 - 23)? What sort of speech is coming from your lips? Is it the speech of a Spirit-filled man or woman, full of praise to God, and full of love, warmth, encouragement and tenderness towards those around you? Does your speech refresh and do good to those who hear it? When someone has spent time in your company, does he go away feeling encouraged and blessed, saying to himself "It was really good for me to be with that person"? The Psalmist says:

The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, "The LORD is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him."
(Psalm 92:12-15)

Is that a description of you, and of me?

Or could it be said that the opposite is true? Has perhaps the river of the Holy Spirit dried up to a tiny trickle that evaporates as soon as it hits the hot sand of the desert of this world? Have you become a "dry stick", hard and brittle, impatient, easily angered, over-sensitive, self-centred, rude, unpleasant, cynical

and sarcastic? Have joy, thanksgiving and praise disappeared from your life, and have they been replaced by a miserable, complaining, and self-pitying attitude? Do people say of you, having met you, "What an unpleasant person. I do pity the poor family!" We need to examine ourselves to see if this is the case with us.

The question is, if you are a Christian, and yet the river of the Holy Spirit has dried up in your life, what has gone wrong? We cannot say that it is because the Holy Spirit has not been given, or has been withdrawn from the world, because we know that now, after Pentecost, the promise of the Holy Spirit is "for you, and your children, and to all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2.39). So what has happened? We cannot say that the promise of Christ has failed. So what is the problem? It must be that we have somehow grieved, or even quenched, the Holy Spirit in our lives, through our sin.

What then should we do? Firstly, we must examine ourselves to be sure that we really are Christians. The person who does not belong to Christ does not have the Holy Spirit at all. If you have any doubt as to whether you really have been saved, come to Christ and ask him to save you, and receive from him his salvation. As we were saying earlier, you need to "drink" him into your life. Secondly, if you are sure you a Christian, you need to examine yourself to see if there is some sin which has grieved, or quenched, the Holy Spirit in your life. Go through your life. Examine your conscience. Consider if there is some sin which God has been putting his finger on in your life and you have been refusing to repent of. You will not go forward as a Christian until you yield to God. Ask God to open up your eyes, to enable you to see any sins in your life of which you have been unaware, but which are offensive to him. Thirdly, consciously meditate on the love of God. Fill your mind with thoughts of his love, of what he has done for you in Christ, and of the glory of heaven. Make a practice of

rejoicing. Sing hymns and songs throughout the day. Finally, and most importantly, ask to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Here we are wonderfully encouraged by the Lord. He said,

"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11.11-13)

So come to your heavenly Father. Confess your sins to him. Confess your need. Believe that he is your loving Father who loves to give good gifts to his children. Ask him to fill you afresh with his Spirit. He will do so if you truly and seriously seek him, believing he will answer.

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