

THE RIVER OF LIFE

Revelation 22:1-3a

Today we are going to reflect on rivers and what they mean for us.

Rivers and life around rivers have always formed an integral part of human life. Rivers have been a source of water and food and transport. They have often been used as avenues for exploring unknown lands on every continent. Every large urban community depends on at least one river for its existence, if only to dam as a water supply.

And rivers are loved for their scenic beauty. Like camping at the beach, camping by a river is somehow extra special.

But rivers can be terrifying, as we have seen just recently in Brisbane. When a river is in flood, especially a flash flood, the destructive force is enormous!

And even worse, some 'futurolologists' reckon the next big world war will be over access to fresh water.

No wonder Jesus concluded his Sermon on the Mounts with a story comparing two people (Matthew 7): one who built on a rocky hill, and the other who built by the flats by the creek. Living on a rocky hill might have been inconvenient, especially when it came to the chore of getting water from the creek; but it ended up being far safer.

And if one lives in an arid country, then the thought of fresh cool water in abundance is a wonderful dream.

Not surprisingly, such a dream is actually a vision of what heaven is like: Revelation 22:1-3a

¹Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³No longer will there be any curse.

This Vision actually has a passage from Ezekiel as its background.

Ezekiel 47:1-12 describes a mighty river rising in the temple in Jerusalem in the time of salvation. The river flows toward the Dead Sea and transforms the desert into fertile land. On both its banks fruit trees will grow that will bear fresh fruit monthly and the leaves of which will have a healing effect.

It's interesting that under the hill where the temple stood in Jerusalem there was a spring, the Gihon. Now, in Ezekiel, this little spring has all the characteristics of the river in paradise (Genesis 2:10-14).

John, though, has this river flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. He adds to the paradise imagery by including the tree of life. The rows of trees that, according to Ezekiel 47:12, accompany the river on both sides, are rather forcefully combined with the tree of life.

So for John, at the end time the paradise with which the old creation began is exceeded in a way that corresponds to the nature of the new creation.

The River and trees signify life and salvation for all “nations”, nations meaning there are no cultural or

political division in heaven! Death, suffering, and pain are now forever gone, for, as v3a [cf Zech 14:11] underscores—there will be “nothing accursed,” that is, nothing that stands outside the saving sphere of God.

It is the River of Life flowing from God’s throne that becomes a spring in every church.

The word ‘font’ is from a Latin word, via French, meaning ‘spring’. The word ‘fountain’ also comes from the same Latin word.

Here in Baptism we are washed in the Living Water that flows from the throne of God and the Lamb. The Lamb, of course, is Jesus Christ. All that God the Father aimed to accomplish by his Son, all that Jesus the Son of God accomplished in his life, death and resurrection, we drink deeply of at this font as the water is splashed on us in God’s Name.

Ezekiel looked forward to that day when the arid land would become fruitful. Us ‘arid lands’ (after all, we were made from earth – cf Gen 2) are invigorated by the River of Life, God’s love flowing into our lives:

³*At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.* ⁴*But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared,* ⁵*he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,* ⁶*whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, [Titus 3:3-6, TNIV].*

Actually, what comes to my mind are two images: people standing in a fountain on a hot day, or under a waterfall. Very invigorating!

The final image of the river that I want to pick up on is its fruitfulness.

After World War I, many stretches along the Murray River were settled as small fruit blocks, using water from the river to irrigate the farms in an otherwise desert countryside. From the air, these farm lands look like a thin green strip either side of the river among the brown of the landscape. Much like what the River Nile looks like.

In the Revelation passage it is God who plants a fruit garden alongside the River – fruit that would be a blessing and healing to the nations. But in the Ezekiel passage, the image is more of God's people being like fruitful trees planted along the river – and they being the blessing to the nations.

I like both images.

Both are about being fruitful – nourishing life. And both are about being fruitful because the fruit tree roots take water up from the River of Life, that is from God.

³³ *“Make a tree good and its fruit will be good,” Jesus said, “or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. [Matthew 12:33, TNIV]*

Like trees standing by the riverside, God has filled us with his life that we may be his fruitful trees, bringing his blessing and healing to the nations.

Amen.