

Living Water

Reflection by Noel Due

Thirst is something Australians know a bit about! “For a hard-earned thirst, you need a big cold beer...” You probably know how the rest goes. And those of a certain age might remember the soft drink ad: “light on the fizz, so you can slam it down fast.” How good is it to have a long cold drink at the end of a long hot day?

I live in tropical north Queensland, and I tell you, there are few things in life so satisfying at the end of a hot summer's day! It's something to really savour! My mouth's watering just thinking about it! But even though we know the satisfaction of a thirst-quenching cold drink, we rarely experience true thirst.

People who've been close to dying of thirst—sailors lost at sea, POWs during the war, desert explorers—can't ever forget it; the pain is indescribable. It's not just the physical symptoms, which are pretty horrendous—swollen tongue, heart racing, blood pressure dropping, delirium, splitting headaches, seizures, kidney failure and then eventual death—but the raging, incurable, unquenchable thirst itself. Nothing can relieve it. And, if and when help comes, re-hydration has to be taken very carefully. You can't make the intravenous fluid 'light on the fizz, to slam down fast'. It has to be a gentle process, and the healing takes days.

Crucified men knew the terrible pains of a thirst like this. It's understandable. The blood loss from the whipping before the crucifixion, and the blood loss from the crucifixion itself. Hanging from the cross in the hot sun, the sweat pouring down because of the pain, and because of the strain of simply trying to breathe. Yes, crucified men were thirsty men. They would have given anything for a drink of water. Jesus knew the horror of such physical thirst, and yet he also knew much, much more.

Colin was a friend of mine. He drank too much. He started drinking too much when he was in his teens, and by the time I knew him he was an alcoholic. There's no way around it, no other way to describe it. Here he was, in his mid-thirties, with a sclerotic liver and his life in tatters.

We talked long and often. I met him when he was in a dry spell. Reflecting back on that time, Colin said “I was a dry drunk. You can be a wet drunk or a dry drunk. Inside nothing had changed. I was just as angry, just as bitter. I was a dry drunk. I bottled it all up, until the cork blew. Then I hit the bottle.”

He'd been through a rehab program, but had relapsed more than once. When I first met him he was a 'dry drunk'; a few months later, he was a wet one again. One day he was found passed out in the gutter not far from his front door: he'd try to make it back after a bender and didn't get there. I saw him in hospital the next day. He told me, “What they say is true: 'one drink is one too many and a thousand's never enough'”. He spoke of the crowd he'd been with and how they, all on a bender together, had egged one another on. He spoke of how he vented his spleen when he was drunk and how the drink numbed his pain. But it was also a physical addiction. The patterns had to be broken. The dependencies had to be named. Again.

And underneath it all was a raging thirst. Not a physical one, but a spiritual one. A thirst for love, for forgiveness, for approval. A thirst to be worth something. To matter. To love. It's a curious thought isn't it: lots of us are drinking ourselves to death because we're thirsty. And a thousand drinks are never enough. That raging, unquenchable spiritual thirst underneath Colin's bender, that's what makes us really thirsty.

One day a woman came to a well in the middle of the day. Like Colin, she too, was thirsty. Thirsty for love, for respect. So thirsty she'd had five husbands and the man she was living with now wasn't her husband. Jesus offered her water; not from the well she was standing next to, but from the well of his own life. He offered her living water; water that she could drink from and not thirst again. We don't know her name; but we know what happened. She found living water that day. She left her water jar and told all of the blokes in the town she came from about a man who could give them living water.

Colin's problem, her problem—your problem and mine—is that we've tried to quench our thirst in the wrong places. We've gone to wells that have dried up. We pull up buckets of dust thinking they'll help quench the thirst we have. We feed on ashes, we go home drunk, and we're still thirsty.

Jesus knew the raging thirst Colin battled with. He experienced the emotional dislocation and pain of the woman's search for love. That's what the cross was all about. He sat in our ashes. He became the dust bowl of our broken relationships. He left the well-watered gardens of his Father's house, to wander out into the desert to find us. And he found us where we were, laying in the dust of death. And the dust of death is the driest, most desiccating place in all the universe.

Yes, he had a raging physical thirst on the cross. But the indescribable pain of his suffering wasn't that. It was the spiritual thirst of being cut off from God. He was abandoned, cut off from life and hope; he was delivered over to the haunting and howling wasteland of our hearts. He experienced all the pain we experience, and more. He couldn't even try to satisfy his spiritual thirst. He was pinned to a cross. He couldn't move. Couldn't go to the pub to drown his sorrows. He couldn't lift a finger to help himself.

Though he didn't move an inch physically on the cross, mentally and spiritually he was cast into the outer darkness. He was utterly alone, lost in the driest and most deadly place of all time, with not even a drop of water for his parched lips. Why? To find us. To bring us home. He met Colin there, even before Colin knew Jesus existed. He met you and me there, and with the last ounce of his strength his pierced hands lifted us up to God. He was buried in our ash heap. We were lifted up to the light, to the rivers of living water he had left to find us.

That's why he cried out "I thirst". Though he didn't move an inch, he'd been on the longest journey of all time. To find you. To rescue me. To meet you, 'face to face'. And now, risen from the grave, Jesus has rivers of living water for you and for me. To wash, heal, restore, and quench our thirst. Forever.

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