Sermon: Drought Service
Text: John 7:37-39

My wife Jodi grew up on a farm at World's End, some 18 kilometres southeast of Burra, on the dry eastern side of the Mt Lofty Ranges. This property was known as Dutton's Trough, because there was a permanent spring that flowed out of the hills overlooking the farm. In earlier days it was a watering point for drovers moving sheep. Later on, it served as an invaluable source of water for the farm. Jodi's grandmother wrote in a history of her life: "I milked the two cows and fed the fowls and did the garden. They had plenty of water. They had a spring about half a mile away up in the hills by the creek. Grandmother Heinrich had made a garden by the spring, and she used to drag the water out of the creek for it. Then as they got a bit more financial, they put up a windmill and a tank by the spring and piped the water down to the house and garden."

I don't know if the spring has run dry in these last 18 months, as South Australia has suffered an extreme rainfall deficit. The widespread rains that fell in July injected a note of hope into what is a desperate situation. And although crops have started to grow, and pasture too, we are now experiencing what is known as a 'green drought.' Things may look good on the surface, but the moisture hasn't penetrated deep, and the land needs so much more rain.

The prophet Jeremiah was sent to speak to God's people in the worst of times, including a severe drought. His message was that God's patience with them had run out, because they had moved further and further away from God's will and God's ways, and enough was enough. We hear this sad refrain: "**they are dismayed and despairing and cover their heads**…" Some of us know exactly what this means. Hope is in short supply, stress is increasing, anxiety is high, we feel that we are at the limit of what we can cope with. And then there's the spiritual impact. Listen to God's people cry out:

"**Although our sins testify against us, do something, Lord, for the sake of your name.**
For we have often rebelled; we have sinned against you.
You who are the hope of Israel, its Saviour in times of distress,
why are you like a stranger in the land, like a traveller who stays only a night?
Why are you like a man taken by surprise, like a warrior powerless to save?
You are among us, Lord, and we bear your name; do not forsake us!"

There's no holding back. God, we are your people, but where are you? Why aren't you doing anything? We may have felt the same way. God, why is this happening to us, to our land, to our town? We can't hold on any longer.

God had commanded Jeremiah to speak a word of judgement to his people. The drought was one of the means that he used to get their attention. But sadly, God goes on ask Jeremiah not to pray for the wellbeing of the people, because God's decision has been made. But what does God say to us today? Does he listen to our prayers? Has his patience run out? It's bad enough that this drought is making us aware of both our frailties and our utter dependence on God, but how much worse would it be if God withheld his care and blessing? We don't have a word directly from God about this drought, not to mention floods elsewhere, and the algal bloom that is causing so much

damage to our marine environment. It could be that in some cases human actions has exacerbated natural events. We do know that this good creation "**has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time**" as indeed we ourselves "**groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons and daughters, the redemption of our bodies**."

What we do know, without any doubt, is that we need God. And our sure hope rests in the God who has entered this good yet broken creation in the person of his Son Jesus Christ. Jesus is the game changer, the life giver, the hope bringer, the one who guaranteed that there is "**nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God.**" We hear from Jesus today as he teaches in the temple. It's one of the high points in the Jewish religious calendar: the Feast of Tabernacles, also known as the Festival of Booths. This festival was held at the end of harvest and was a time of giving thanks to God for his provision. But it also commemorated the way God looked after his people on their Exodus journey. In thirsty country, God provided water to sustain them, even from a rock. Every day during the festival, water was drawn from the pool of Siloam and brought to the temple, where it was poured over the altar.

The people also heard readings from God's holy book. "**With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation**." "**I will pour out water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground. I will pour out my spirit out upon your descendants and my blessing on your offspring**." In dry and difficult times, these promises sustained God's people. But God had more in store for them, much more. That more was Jesus, and he was standing right there.

"**On the last and greatest day of the festival, the great day, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me."** Jesus knew how to pick his moments. For six days God's covenant people had been praying and worshipping. It wasn't easy for them, living under Roman occupation. They were thirsty for release. They wanted God to act, but many of them had given up real hope that anything would change. They were spiritually dehydrated.

In the landscape of our lives, perhaps this is how we feel right now. It could be the drought, or a tough family situation, a relationship that has gone sour, a job that provides little satisfaction, or nagging questions about the future, the 'why' of life. Or perhaps what we see happening around us, local politics, international conflicts. All these things drain our energy and sap our spirits. In and of ourselves, we quickly run dry. And become tired, cynical, grumpy, even bitter. And we are not alone. Family members, friends, neighbours. All in the same boat. People all around are sick of the slick promises that life will be alright if they buy this or do that, have this or go there. They've tried everything going and found that it doesn't satisfy them deep down. No matter how much they try to ignore this thirst for meaning, for significance, for security, it will always come back.

Jesus offers relief from this thirst. "**Whoever believes in me, as the Scriptures has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.**" Just like the spring that watered the garden at Dutton's Trough and gave life and hope when all around was parched. Jesus' words speak of living water flowing "**out of the believer's stomach, or innards."** It's like drinking a glass of chilled water on a

hot day. This water of Jesus' love takes away the bitter aftertaste of sin, and the parching accusation of guilt, the fear of an uncertain future, and replaces it with a sense of spiritual wellbeing, renewed energy and hope. Remember what Jesus said to the woman at the well: "**Those who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."**

The gospel writer John explains that the river of life that will never dry up is the Holy Spirit. This is the precious gift Jesus was going to pour out on his church as a result of his sacrifice on the cross. Jesus' death on the cross shows us the extraordinary lengths to which God was prepared to go to bring us back home to him. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 5: "**God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.**" He says in 1 Corinthians: "**For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body-whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free- and we were all given the one spirit to drink**." The living water of the Spirit has been poured out to overflowing in our lives. The spring of new life in Christ will never run dry as we allow God to continually fill us with his Spirit through hearing his word, through receiving the food and drink of the kingdom, the body and blood of Christ, through prayer and through time spent with others who have been baptised with water and the Spirit.

The last 18 or so months have not been easy. We continue to pray for rain, knowing Jesus' promise that his Father "**causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous**" We don't just pray for ourselves, but for the whole state. We pray for physical river of life-giving water to flow over a thirsty land. And we also pray that others may see the grace of God through coming to faith in Christ. This is what brings hope to the cracked earth of broken lives and fear of a dried-up future.

May the Holy Spirit replenish you and fill you to overflowing with God's love. May God the Father send drenching rain to our land And may Jesus the Son bring the living water of forgiveness and hope to all. Amen.

Peace in Christ

Pastor Andrew Brook