

## Reflection Notes – 26/3/17

- Geoff Stevenson

### Beside the Still Waters...

This morning we walked our dogs along the Toongabbie Creek. After the rain it is more of a small river, rapidly flowing with small rapids. It is brown coloured today, not its usual clear-green reflecting the blue sky or foliage along its banks. The rock platforms that we could ordinarily walk out onto are covered in flowing water. It looks alive and more violent and aggressive than normal. The sound is louder and there are places where trees and bushes have been uprooted in the muddy banks that are sometimes submerged and sometimes high and dry. The creek looks different today, as it has throughout this recent big wet. It will settle down again and there will be times when the flow reduces to very little and the flora and fauna in and around the creek find life harsh and unpredictable.

I have been reading some spiritual reflection on water these last couple of weeks. In her book, 'Grounded' Diana Butler Bass has a section on the spirituality of water. All the major (and not so major) religions have a focus around water. Hindus gather at the Ganges River, a holy place. The ancient Egyptians used the Nile as a holy river. The Jewish Bible is filled with references to water, rivers and uses them as metaphors for God's gracious love and healing that flows through the land bringing life. These metaphors carry on into the Christian New Testament where there are stories about water that brings life to parched bodies and spirits. Last week's story focussed on water at a well as a metaphor for the Living water of God.

Throughout human civilisation water has been a central factor. Without fresh water we can't live and humans have always built their cities in and around water sources. The cradle of civilisation in ancient Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq) was focussed in the midst of the Tigris-Euphrates River systems that could support life and the density of human populations living together. In my life I have lived or worked in and around the 3 main river systems of Sydney – the Georges River, the Parramatta River and the Hawkesbury River. These have all been important not only as landmarks but as central sources for human life. The flow of rivers provides fresh water for agriculture, marine life and therefore fishing, leisure activities. Without these river systems the early colony would not have developed as it has or where it has.

In the reflection by Diana Butler Bass I read some fascinating facts about water. Water covers ~71% of the earth's surface and is around 70% of the human body and we cannot live without fresh water. Of all the water on the earth 96% is saline in seas and oceans and therefore cannot be used by humans for drinking, irrigation or general use. Another ~2% of the earth's water is ice, leaving around 2% as freshwater, usable by humans and other flora and fauna. Much of this 2% is trapped underground and only about 0.3% of the world's water is actually available to us in lakes, rivers and streams as fresh water. Water is an incredibly important and scarce resource. It is something we city dwellers in particular take for granted until there is a time of drought and we are placed on restrictions. We do not understand the real importance of water. Our waterways are often drains and sewers removing wastes and run off from gardens and urban living. Much of

the earth's usable drinking water is contaminated and the removal of trees and changing habitats have an enormous impact on our water systems. The marshy and mangrove regions along the rivers and the swampy muddy zones between dry ground and the river proper are called the riparian zone. This is a vital place where the life and health of rivers is maintained. These places are often destroyed, built on or tidied up to make them look more acceptable and in the process destroyed. We have much to re-learn about our rivers and waterways, their health and our (and all nature's) dependence upon this vital resource.

This week we read Psalm 23, an old faithful psalm well used in funerals and at times to offer comfort. God is the shepherd who cares for the sheep through good and bad, protecting and sustaining through dark valleys or good times. It is filled with wonderful images that take time to delve into and appreciate. Perhaps those who live rural lives more fully appreciate the import of this beautiful psalm than those of us who live more material-based lives in the cities where much more happens within homes and buildings.

There is a wonderful line in the psalm that says; 'He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul...' I pondered this a little as I thought about Diana Butler Bass's reflection on water. It isn't the line I normally focus upon. I tend to go for the protection in valley of the shadow of death or the party in God's house near the end. Today I stopped and pondered how God leads me beside still waters and restores my soul. Water is so much a part of my life, even when I don't think about it. I could not survive without water. I thought about the need and deep desire for long drinks of cool water after one of my longer walks, especially through this humid and warm season. All around there has been rain and too much water and the grass has grown far too quickly. The pool turned green and we have had to work out how to restore its quality. The dogs drank from the puddles along our way today and then had long drinks when we got home. Water!

More than the need and desire for water to quench my thirst or cleanse my body, I recognised the need for restoration of my soul. Busy-ness or stress, the demands of life and dealing with some harsh situations drains us and we need to be restored in our being. A cool drink from still waters is part of it but something deeper is necessary to touch our spirit, our soul, our inner being to bring rest, renewal and peace. Diana Butler Bass also makes the point that water is a source of spiritual renewal – a walk along the water's edge; sitting and watching a river, an ocean, a lake, are all healing and renewing in and of themselves. It is in the sitting and pondering, the experiencing the gentleness or even violence of the water, the rhythms of nature and life that restore our being. God is in the midst of water and nature and life, the One who holds all things in gracious relationship. When we stop and ponder, rest and allow the still or moving waters to touch our being we are connected with something deeper and more profound and if we push through in our patient reflection we will know the presence of God. This presence is a restful stream of living water. It is an ocean that refreshes and revitalises the tired and hot body at the beach in summer. It is a presence of gentle calm or inspiring action or the deep refreshment of soul-quenching, restorative living water that gives us life. God is the essential source of all life and the metaphor of water helps us ponder God's all present grace that holds us in love and gives us life.

*The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want... He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.*