

Along the track

The Living Water of the Holy Spirit

St Cyril of Jerusalem didn't have an easy life. He was a bishop in the early church (mid 330s) during turbulent times. He was thrown out of office, reinstated, thrown out, and then reinstated again. Now he has been declared a doctor of the church for his teaching that was acceptable, then not, then accepted and so on. Full marks for his fidelity and his persistence – he was not the only bishop over time to be fired for expressing views that later became acceptable. The personal toll it must have taken on him is not acknowledged by historians.

He was ordained a priest by the bishop of Jerusalem and, in recognition for his scholarship in scripture, given the task during Lent of catechising those preparing for Baptism and catechising the newly baptised during the Easter season. The instructions are still much admired and some found their way into the breviary, the prayer of the church prayed by priests and religious daily, even today.

His Pentecost instruction includes this comment on Jesus' teaching that *"whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."* Jn 13-14

The area around Jerusalem is pretty dry. Certainly south of Jerusalem, rain is precious as much of that country is desert. But to the north, in Galilee and surrounding areas, water and rain were never taken for granted. So it struck a cord when Cyril used water to describe the gift of the Spirit:

This is a new kind of water, a living, leaping water, welling up for those who are worthy. But why did Christ call the grace of the Spirit water? Because all things are dependent on water; plants and animals have their origin in water. Water comes down from heaven as rain, and although it is always the same in itself, it produces many different effects, one in the palm tree, another in the vine, and so on throughout the whole of creation. It does not come down, now as one thing, now as another, but while remaining essentially the same, it adapts itself to the needs of every creature that receives it.

It is a beautiful image of the gift of the Spirit. This living, leaping water, the Holy Spirit is present in everything – a spirit that gives life to physical creation as well as to love, human creativity, compassion, forgiveness, wonder and awe, wisdom, understanding. The Spirit comes, according to Cyril as a true friend and protector to save, to heal, to teach, to counsel, to strengthen, to console. This gift of the Spirit at the one time unites us with others but at the same time it inspires us in our differences. Cyril put it this way:

The Spirit makes one person a teacher of divine truth, inspires another to prophesy, gives another the power of casting out devils, enables another to interpret holy Scripture. The Spirit strengthens one person's self-control, shows another how to help the poor, teaches another to fast and lead a life of asceticism, makes another oblivious to the needs of the body, trains another for martyrdom. His action is different in different people, but the Spirit himself is always the same.

So when we come to realise that the Spirit is at work in creation around us, we come to see its wonder and its beauty in another light, but also we come to realise the importance of preserving even the smallest part. Everything has its place. Creation reveals to us God's beauty, glory, power, wisdom, presence, and creativity. We come to realise too that the Spirit is at work in every person. That is easy to see in those we love, those of a common mind, those we agree with. It is much harder to see the Spirit at work in those who are different, those who may not agree with. But they too have their place, they too are gifted by the same Spirit.

Sometimes that takes courage and understanding, both gifts of the Spirit. But, according to Cyril, *As light strikes the eyes of a man who comes out of darkness into the sunshine and enables him to see clearly things he could not discern before, so light floods the soul of the man counted worthy of receiving the Holy Spirit and enables him to see things beyond the range of human vision, things hitherto undreamed of.*

Now that's gift.

Regards
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