

FROM EASTER TO PENTECOST: Celebrating Water and the Spirit

Helen Bergin follows the way water is used in the Easter liturgies to remind us of the lavish outpouring of the Spirit experienced in our tradition and in our everyday living.

For many in Aotearoa NZ, water is taken for granted. Many sail and play in it; workers clean with it; nurses heal with it; creatures drink it. Water is fundamental to daily living.

I recall assisting my mother to bath the younger children. Invariably, the little ones insisted that I add more hot water to prolong their bath and really delay going to bed! The precious commodity of water is healing and renewing.

Yet, we are also aware of water's destructive properties. We witnessed devastation in Fiji during Cyclone Winston. There, water proved detrimental to humans, crops, animals – and more. Sometimes, human activities cause the elements – in this instance, water – to undergo the effects of global mismanagement. Nonetheless, water is indispensable and precious to all creation.

So, how do we honour the traditional link between Spirit and water within the Christian tradition? How does the Spirit, like water, nourish us daily? We may not even

think of water as a symbol of the Spirit. I would like to explore the strong life-giving link between water and the Holy Spirit.

Water and Life

Just as water gives life to planet Earth so water in our Christian stories often points to the Spirit's presence without whom Jesus' disciples cannot survive. One traditional name for the Spirit is "the gift" of God. Elizabeth A. Johnson says of such a Spirit: "Her loving in the world is gracious and inviting, never forcing or using violence but respectfully calling to human freedom, as is befitting a gift." God's Spirit never violates human freedom.

The lavish gift of the Spirit at Pentecost climaxes and extends the movement of the Spirit previously manifest at Easter.

Water and Easter

Four signs, or sacramental moments at the Easter Vigil link the Holy Spirit and water.

The first occurs before the baptisms when the priest plunging the newly-lit Easter candle into water says: "We ask you, Father, with your Son to send the Holy Spirit upon the waters of this font. May all who are buried with Christ in the death of baptism rise also with him to newness of life." This moment symbolises the making holy of water which brings new life to those awaiting baptism.

The second occurs when baptismal candidates immerse themselves in the flowing water of the pool or have water poured on their heads, as they begin life within the Christian community.

The third is when everyone is lavishly sprinkled with Easter water as an encouragement to experience present and ultimate hope of resurrected life.

The fourth arises from particular biblical readings – many of which refer to water. I note two examples. The Genesis reading at the Vigil

recalls God's initial gifting to creation of "a wind from God [which] swept over the face of the waters" (Gen 1:2). This wind is often linked with the creative Spirit bringing into existence elements fundamental to Earth – darkness and light, waters and land, trees and animals, and diverse human beings.

The reading from Exodus describes God's liberation of Israel from within Red Sea waters. Moses and his people were saved because they chose to journey into "the water forming a wall of water for them on their right and on their left" (Ex 14:22). Their risky action culminated in liberation from slavery. Our faith forebears entrusted their lives to God – with Moses as leader.

However, the Easter Vigil highlights even more profoundly Jesus' journey through suffering and death into resurrected life. Baptism, with its symbol of deep water, fonts and pools, expresses a dying within water which is followed by joyful risings from water. As disciples we recall each year that our many "deaths" during life will be climaxed in unimaginable joy. And at each stage of our daily lives, God's Spirit accompanies each of us.

Facing Local Reality

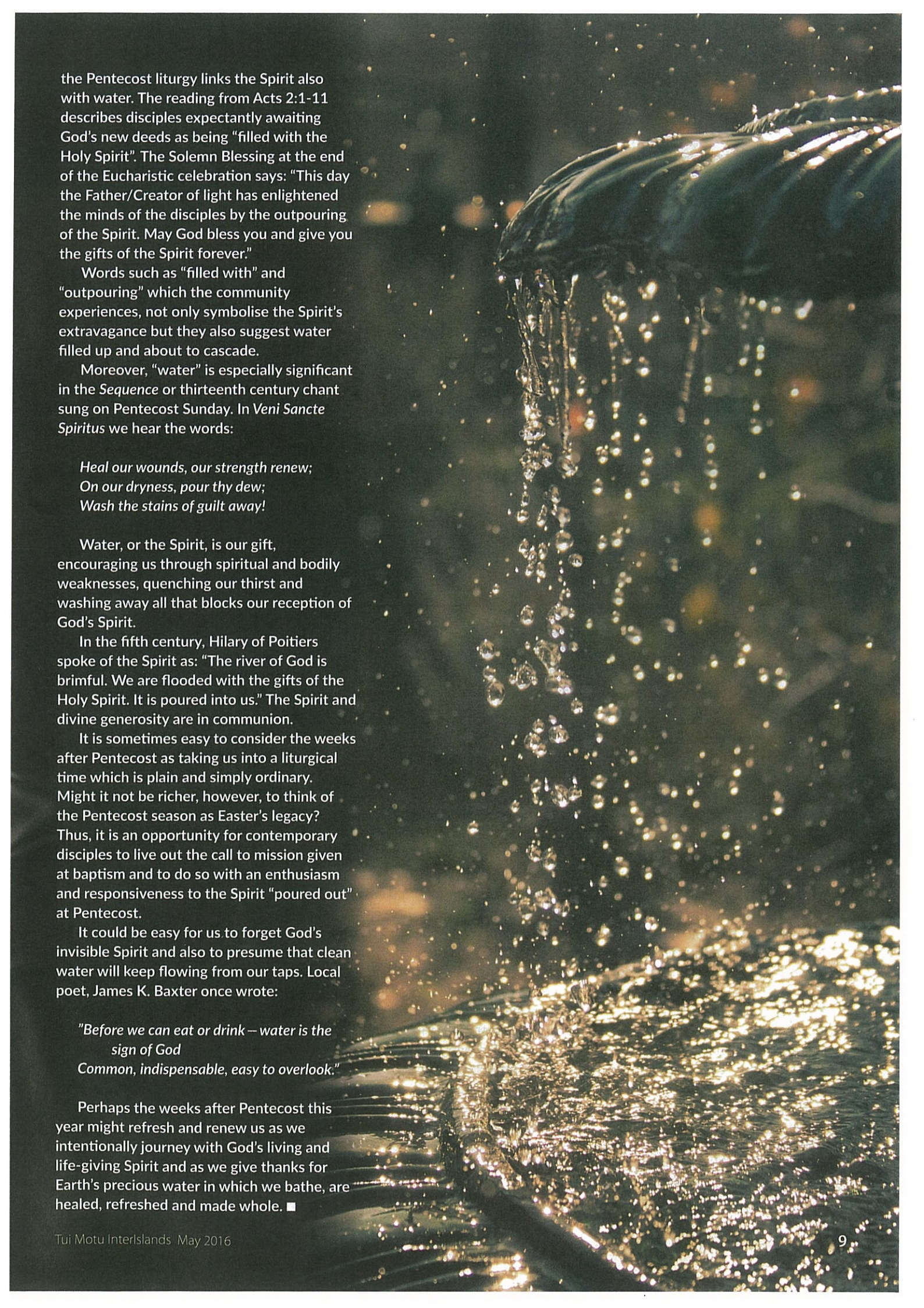
As we reflect on the paschal journey which involves the presence of both Spirit and Water, it is salutary to recall that in Aotearoa New Zealand there is currently 26 per cent nitrate in our waterways, many rivers need attention, numerous parties have vested and conflicting interests in the use of water and many streams no longer harbour fish because of pollution. In light of such realities, how then might the scriptures read at Pentecost and our tradition help us to appreciate better both the gift of the Spirit and our wonderful resource of water?

Water and Pentecost

While it is common to link the Spirit with images of fire and wind,

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the Pentecost liturgy links the Spirit also with water. The reading from Acts 2:1-11 describes disciples expectantly awaiting God's new deeds as being "filled with the Holy Spirit". The Solemn Blessing at the end of the Eucharistic celebration says: "This day the Father/Creator of light has enlightened the minds of the disciples by the outpouring of the Spirit. May God bless you and give you the gifts of the Spirit forever."

Words such as "filled with" and "outpouring" which the community experiences, not only symbolise the Spirit's extravagance but they also suggest water filled up and about to cascade.

Moreover, "water" is especially significant in the *Sequence* or thirteenth century chant sung on Pentecost Sunday. In *Veni Sancte Spiritus* we hear the words:

*Heal our wounds, our strength renew;
On our dryness, pour thy dew;
Wash the stains of guilt away!*

Water, or the Spirit, is our gift, encouraging us through spiritual and bodily weaknesses, quenching our thirst and washing away all that blocks our reception of God's Spirit.

In the fifth century, Hilary of Poitiers spoke of the Spirit as: "The river of God is brimful. We are flooded with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is poured into us." The Spirit and divine generosity are in communion.

It is sometimes easy to consider the weeks after Pentecost as taking us into a liturgical time which is plain and simply ordinary. Might it not be richer, however, to think of the Pentecost season as Easter's legacy? Thus, it is an opportunity for contemporary disciples to live out the call to mission given at baptism and to do so with an enthusiasm and responsiveness to the Spirit "poured out" at Pentecost.

It could be easy for us to forget God's invisible Spirit and also to presume that clean water will keep flowing from our taps. Local poet, James K. Baxter once wrote:

*"Before we can eat or drink – water is the
sign of God
Common, indispensable, easy to overlook."*

Perhaps the weeks after Pentecost this year might refresh and renew us as we intentionally journey with God's living and life-giving Spirit and as we give thanks for Earth's precious water in which we bathe, are healed, refreshed and made whole. ■