

They say that the definition of a good sermon is that it should have a good beginning, a good ending but that they should be as close together as possible. I read, recently, of one poor preacher who failed to get it right. Before he began to preach one Sunday morning he thought he should explain why he had a plaster on his chin. "As I was shaving this morning I was thinking about today's message when I lost my concentration and accidentally cut my chin with the razor." He then went on to preach a very long sermon. Afterwards a teenager greeted him by saying: Vicar, next week why don't you think about your shaving and cut the sermon." I bet he felt similar to the vicar who preached a real vigorous sermon and then was met by a little old lady at the door who said, "You know vicar, every sermon you preach is better than your next one." Strange as it may seem I have only recently found out why coffee is served after our service. It is to ensure that everyone is fully awake, after the sermon, before driving home.

As always, therefore, I am aware I have to be very careful. However I start on safe ground. I don't believe I have used my expertise and love of geography as much as I should have done in my preaching over the years, but today I am. However, first I want to mention about Joe, Bob and Dave who were hiking in a wilderness area when they came upon a large, raging, violent river. They needed to get to the other side, but had no idea of how to do so. Joe prayed to God, saying, "Please God, give me the strength to cross this river." Poof! God gave him big arms and strong legs, and he was able to swim across the river in about two hours, although he almost drowned a couple of times. Seeing this, Dave prayed to God, saying, "Please God, give me the strength and the tools to cross this river." Poof! God gave him a rowing boat and he rowed across the river in about an hour, after almost capsizing the boat a couple of times. Bob had seen how this worked out for the other two, so he also prayed to God saying, "Please God, give me the strength and the tools, and the intelligence, to cross this river." Poof! God turned him into a woman. She looked at the map, walked upstream a hundred yards and walked across the bridge.

Whatever the difficulties faced by hikers in crossing rivers and streams, in the geographical and geological cycle of life, streams of all shapes and sizes from small trickles to raging, violent torrents play such a crucial part. It is an amazing, natural cycle, a water cycle, a cycle of life. Because of the sun's heat, water evaporates from rivers, lakes and the sea and this moist air rises into the upper atmosphere where it cools and condenses to form water droplets. These form clouds and when too heavy for the upwelling currents to hold, the water droplets fall as rain, or if cold enough sleet and snow. The rainwater falls to the ground to fill up streams and rivers. Some rain falls on the ground and percolates through reaching the underground water tables, which are underground streams or lakes. Where these reach impermeable rocks (those that do not let water through) the water flows underground and eventually comes out on the surface as a spring. Water literally flows out of

the ground. These springs become the source of streams that wind their way down the hillside and meander and erode their way through valleys to reach rivers and rivers eventually reach the sea and the amazing cycle begins all over again. Landscapes and lives are shaped by it. We depend on it for our survival. Spectacular geographical features, such as valleys and interlocking spurs, waterfalls and rapids, pools and lakes, deltas and estuaries, are all created by the forces of nature within this amazing water cycle.

There is always an inflow and always an outflow and one feeds the other in spectacular fashion, twenty-four hours a day, every year, every decade, every century. It is a global cycle. We are aware that some parts of our world suffer as their part of the global cycle dries up. We are also aware that in desert areas, the water cycle is sporadic and the impact instantaneous. Flash floods come and go so quickly and spectacularly, desert landforms such as the deep valleys called wadis, oases and the table-top mountains called mesas are carved and transformed literally in a matter of days or even hours.

Sorry but I am in my element with all this geography! It was Amy Carmichael, the Christian missionary in India, well-known for her writings as well as her missionary work, who noted while sitting by a forest pool that the water did marvelous things with the rocks and there was always an inflow, and always an outflow. The inflow and outflow never stopped. 'I knew, of course, that the water that flowed out was the water that flowed in.' she said and the pool 'had no water of its own, yet all the year round there was an outflow' No water of its own! What a very interesting observation!

The Bible has many references to clouds, fountains, ponds, pools, rivers, the sea, springs, wells, brooks and streams, all in a geographical context. In Deuteronomy, for example, 8: 7-8 'For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land— a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig-trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey.' And Psalm 104 vv 10 – 13

More important, though, is the way in which the physical feature of a stream is seen as symbolic of God's love, mercy, grace, Spirit - flowing like a stream of living water continuously into our hearts and lives IF we are open to receive it. God's love, mercy and grace flowing endlessly into the hearts of people open to receive it – refreshing, filling, quenching spiritual thirst, strengthening and enabling, as symbolised by streams of clear, clean, unpolluted, running water.

Of course, it is possible that debris can fill our spiritual pool and stop the water flowing in or out and you may already be thinking what this debris may be. However God's love and grace has been flowing ever since he created our world just as streams have been flowing, since creation, from their springs down the hillsides to their respective river or lake. And people have had the choice to open themselves to the flow of God's streams of living water and then to outflow this love and mercy to others. Sitting by the pool Amy Carmichael remarks: 'if love flows in, love will glow out. Let love flow in, that

was the word of The Pool.' Many have opened themselves up to the flow of God's living water, but so too have so many others decided (and still do decide) to put on their waterproof clothing, put up their umbrellas and refuse to have anything at all to do with these streams of living water.

I always smile at the story of the young boy who is sent to bed by his father. Five minutes later...."Da-ad...." "What?" "I'm thirsty. Can you bring a drink of water?" "No. You had your chance. Lights out." Five minutes later: "Da-aaaad....." "WHAT?" "I'm THIRSTY. Can I have a drink of water??" "I told you NO!" If you ask again, I'll have to come upstairs and smack you!!" Five minutes later....."Daaaa-aaaad....." "WHAT!" "When you come up to smack me, can you bring me a drink of water?"

Perhaps there is a lesson for us here when we read John 7 vv 37 and 38 - all about being thirsty and needing to drink. Jesus makes a remarkable promise in those verses and the Good News translation tells us that Jesus said it in a loud voice. We know, from verse 39, that, by the streams of living water, Jesus was referring to the Spirit.

How does that make you feel? Does it want to make you so determined to have a drink, just like the little boy in our story?

Just like the streams in and out of the pool, or in the water cycle, from spring to river – so too, we should allow God's Spirit, his love, mercy and grace to flow into our hearts and out of our hearts to others. Streams flow naturally. They flow continuously. And if we continuously drink from the streams of living water, God's Spirit will flow naturally and continuously in and out of us.

So where are God's streams of living waters? How do we drink? How do we keep the living waters flowing? Where and how do we out-flow? These questions can only be answered in our personal communication with God.

Unfortunately I cannot have the visual images I would love to have at this stage so we must just use our imagination. Imagine, for a moment, sitting beside a stream. Stay and meditate a while. Think of the continuous flow, the ripples or the spray, the sound it makes as it flows down slope. Think about the bigger beyond, to where the water from your stream eventually ends up - the lake or ocean. Think of the value of this water - the stream that we cannot do without and that so many have no access to! Think too, of our need to drink from God's inflow of living waters and our need to outflow to others if we want our faith to be alive. Amy Carmichael quietly wrote: 'If God's love flows in, our love will glow out'. Jesus shouted: 'Whoever believes in me, streams of life-giving water will pour out from his heart.' Contemplate, drink, experience the flowing of God's living water into your heart and then....., well, that is between you and God!