

Sermon for Peter Bentley's Induction As New WellSpring Director

What Matters Here?

Introduction

This is a great day! WellSpring has survived for ten years and is ready to have its second director and begin a rich new phase of its history. At such a moment, we want to both celebrate and also to claim those things we consider essential in this ministry. What Matters Here? What do we want to spend our energy on, what is the "bottom line" about which we will not negotiate?

The person who we are giving special responsibility to for this is Peter. We are glad that we know and trust him as a person who is gifted to lead us in this way. I hope that what I say will be of encouragement to him on the threshold of his new ministry. But the Board, the members and volunteers of WellSpring share this responsibility with him. And so what I want to say is for all of us – what really matters here?

In the early centuries of the church – many men and women seeking God went in to the great deserts of Egypt, Syria and Palestine. Others sought them out, asking that they be given "a word for their soul" The heritage of these desert mothers and fathers – their faith and wisdom, nurture us still.

But in our time, the places of silence and solitude, the spaces for God -must be made in our cities. It is in the crowded, noisy, busy city that people want to find a place that nurtures the spirit and people who will give them a word for their souls. WellSpring belongs within this tradition.

As I was preparing for today, the rain was pouring down steadily outside, soaking the dry earth, splashing the leaves and washing the dust from them. I put my ferns outside to receive a soaking and was amazed again to see how the fronds lifted themselves and took on an entirely new appearance –different from when I water them. Every gardener knows how the garden responds with vitality when it rains. I was reminded again of the biblical concept of "living water" - the rains, the flowing streams and rivers, the gushing sparkling waters of the springs. By contrast the water captured in a cistern or tank, a stagnant pond, or the Dead Sea – was water that was trapped and confined – considered "dead" water.

This vivid encounter with "living water" in their ordinary lives, became a favourite metaphor of the Jewish people to express their experience of God. So God was "the fountain, or wellspring of life." One of the saddest lines in Scripture is the statement of God to the people "you have forsaken me the fountain of living water and hewed out for yourselves broken cisterns that hold no water." This understanding of God as a wellspring within us is the one Jesus used in his conversation with the woman of Samaria at the well. "My gift will be like a spring in you, welling up to eternal life"

Our centre and our ministry – "WellSpring" is precisely a contemporary affirmation of this promise of Jesus. For us then, remaining true to this call is what really matters here. We may explore this more by reflecting on the Scripture passages.

1. Wells Matter

Jesus met the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well "Jacob's well was there" the story records. Jesus arrived tired and hungry in the full heat of the day and like many before him, found the well was a place to rest, to draw water for refreshment and to meet people, especially if you were a stranger.

Moses, fleeing for his life from Pharaoh and his regime, found rest at a well in Midian. There he met his future wife and was welcomed into the social fabric of a foreign land, finding home, love, work and God. Abraham's servant – sent on a long journey to find a wife for Isaac, went to the local well and met Rebekkah. Jacob, in flight for his life from the legitimate anger of his brother Esau, rested by a well and there met Rachel. Wells were places of life, places of hospitality, places of destiny. They guarded a spring of "living water" which continually provided life. Their significance in that ancient society cannot be overestimated.

The little line "*Jacob's well was there*" takes us far beyond the simple comment one might find in a tourist book. It catapults us back into the full richness of the tradition, which knew from earliest times that "God is the fountain (or wellspring) of life." It links us directly with the faith of Abraham and Sarah, and all those who have followed.

Jacob's well was there – reminds that the well was there not only for the lonely woman who came to draw water, for all the townsfolk, the animals and agriculture of the region. Century after century it was there for the stranger, the traveller who needed rest, refreshment and hospitality in a strange land. It was there, for Jesus.

The American Indian, Chief Seattle in his response to the American Congress in the late 1800's for their request to buy his people's traditional lands (incomprehensible thought since no one "owns" the land) is attributed as saying:

*Shining water that moves in the streams and rivers
Is not just water
But the blood of the ancestors
If we sell
You must remember that it is sacred
And you must teach your children that it is sacred
And that every ghostly reflection
In the clear water of the lakes.
Tells of events and memories and the life of my people*

"*Jacob's well was there*" because people had looked after it generation after generation in small and faithful ways, so its sparkling waters would continue to be available for all who needed them. It is a humbling experience to be invited into this tradition and to play our part in keeping this gospel alive for all who pass this way.

"Jacob's well was there"

"Jacob's well was there"

The name "WellSpring" places us immediately within this great tradition that wells matter and we are invited to play our part in it.. When we pass the flowing waters of the fountain in the entrance or sit in the chapel and hear the sound of the spring outside; when we participate in the life and

ministry of this place we are in the company of all those who have encountered Jesus at “Jacob’s well.

2. Re-affirming the importance of wells matters.

Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham, for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham” (Gen 26:18)

A favourite tactic of war in ancient days was the “stopping up” of wells. The enemy would come and throw earth and debris into it, the flow of the water so it was impossible to reach. It was a deadly and very effective way of dismantling the life of the city or community. Another tactic was to pour poison down the well, so that the water was polluted – an old form of chemical or biological warfare, deadly in its effect. Isaac persisted in re-digging the old wells of his father until once again they watered the land and provided for people and animals.

We have our own contemporary versions of the enemy both within us and without – who stops the living waters of God’s Spirit. Carelessness, overbusyness, incessant noise and movement, bitterness unresolved issues of justice, can have deadly effects on the life of God amongst us.

The care lavished by the garden volunteers on the spring in the WellSpring garden which gets dirty, or clogged, or stagnant or smelly – is a picture of the generous care with which we might attend to the wellbeing and life of God’s spirit. The fountain in the entry has to be tended daily – topped up with water to replace what has evaporated, cleaned from the mould which clings so easily to it. These faithful quiet, often hidden acts – keep the waters of the 2 different springs fresh and flowing for the joy of us all.... It would not take long for them to fall into disrepair and decay and eventually to stop flowing completely. So it is with the waters of the Spirit.

There are other ways we clog the spring of the spirit. When I was in Nazareth a few years ago, we visited Mary’s well. It was moving experience to be in the town where Jesus grew up and I was looking forward to sitting by the ancient spring. When we arrived, we were escorted through an elaborate Greek Orthodox Church – dim and crowded with ecclesiastical furnishings of all kinds. We passed across the central nave and down a small flight of stairs. There we stood behind a balustrade and looked down on the small spring. It was impossible to touch the water in any way – the separation was absolute. A short look had to suffice. Other pilgrims were behind us. And we were moved and eventually out of the church. That was it! That was Mary’s well!

I went out into the fresh air and sunshine with a sense of relief. I was profoundly touched by the imprisonment of the precious spring – built over and crowded in by centuries of devotion, which seemed to well nigh smother it. I realised with a shock that we often do exactly that with the living water of the Spirit.-try to capture and tame the life of God

It matters at WellSpring that we keep on affirming the importance of wells and that we continue to tend the wells of the spirit as lovingly as we tend the outer springs we enjoy so much. It is important to stand in the tradition of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekkah, Jacob and Rachel and Leah. In the tradition of Jesus and all those since who have provided spaces for the living waters of the spirit in thirsty land.

James McAuley (Australian poet) passionate poem
Incarnate Word in Whom
All nature lives

*Cast flame upon the earth;
Raise up contemplatives
Among us, those who walk
within the fire
of ceaseless prayer,
impetuous desire,
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land”*

3. What matters then, here at WellSpring if we are to keep on affirming the importance of wells in our land?

The chapel – it matters that it is kept as a place of silence and prayer
St Benedict’s Rule “The oratory (place of prayer) should be in fact what it is called, and nothing else should be done or stored in there.”

The silence and stillness of the place matters. People come to find a well. To crowd the space with too many programs or people is to clutter it and turn it into simply another busy, noisy building in our city.

Laughter matters – that spontaneous laughter between us that is a reflection of the joy and love at the heart of things.

The other day, although I had moved my study across the passageway and I knew Peter was now in my old study – nevertheless, when I was in a hurry to get something for someone, I opened the door to my old room to see a startled Peter sitting there with someone he was talking with! We were both surprised and then we both burst into laughter as I made a hasty exit!

Laughter restores perspective, heals the burdened spirit and joins us in a communion of friendship. “It is a good medicine” as the book of Proverbs states so simply.

The faithful spirit which you bring to this place matters -as the Director, Board, as volunteers, as spiritual directors and supervisors, as gardeners, librarians, creative artists and teachers, as leaders of prayer - that spirit of faithful presence – turning up when you said you would and being there – even if you are the only one there as sometimes happened at prayer at noon – the faithful presence is a fruit of God’s spirit here and more valuable than perhaps any of us really grasp.

Linked with faithfulness is **the generosity of spirit so many of you bring to your different ministries.** Generosity is a sure sign of the presence of God - the largeness of heart that gives lavishly, with gratitude and joy.

Guard too the welcoming hospitable spirit which has been characteristic of WellSpring since the beginning too. This too is a sign of God amongst us - the God who welcomes us all so lavishly into the divine fellowship of love, welcomes us to the Lord’s table, welcomes us home when we have get lost and missed our way. “Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you” the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome “let all guests who arrive be treated like Christ, for he is going to say “I came as a guest and you received me” (Rule of St Benedict)

Humanity matters – encountering the living water of God’s Spirit in deeper ways will make us more human –not less. The gift of the living water of the Spirit is given in our

shared humanity and not in some ethereal or pious overlay – the spirit is earthy and real and very practical.

The ecumenical spirit of this place matters -the living waters of the Spirit are never confined in denominational traditions though historically we have acted as if this is so. A growing love for and a practical participation in the whole Body of Christ is part of that rich tradition of the well as a meeting place for those who have been strangers.

The marriage of contemplation and action matters – to sit by Jacob’s well and encounter the gift of the living water of the Spirit is always to be changed, converted in some way. The living water if confined to the small inner space of our own life becomes the stagnant water of the pond, which flows nowhere – “dead water.” The WellSpring mission statement puts it simply – the purpose of this place is to help people respond to the presence of God “in ways that are just, compassionate, healing and reconciling” The ministry of reconciliation and peacemaking is thus core to the ministry of WellSpring and it matters.

Contemplation and action cannot be separated and if we find this is happening at WellSpring it is time to re-dig the well or to close down the ministry.

As you continue to go in and out of WellSpring, past the fountain in the foyer and down to the silence of the chapel with its sounds of the spring perhaps you will recall these tangible signs of the spirit amongst us and rejoice. What matters here as we go into the future? These things matter very much and we are all of us invited to keep them in our hearts.

Peter I wish you much joy and immense satisfaction in your ministry as Director of WellSpring and to the Board, members and volunteers – I hope you are deeply pleased with where you have brought this special ministry to this time and wish you well as you support Peter in this new time and together shape the future.

Jill Manton
13 April 2003