

Let me begin by introducing this image from my address to our Diocesan Synod in 2019:

I call it low fences and deep waterholes.

Before I apply the image to our life together let me explain the source.

It comes from a preacher's illustration. A farmer from overseas is visiting a grazier in the Australian outback. The host takes his guest up in a helicopter to give him an insight into the sheer size of his property. 'This is absolutely massive!' says the visitor. 'How do you keep your stock from wandering off? You must have to build lots of fences.' The grazier smiles and says 'We don't worry about fences. We just dig deep waterholes!'

The point is clear. If you provide a deep and clean source of water in a dry land the stock will naturally congregate there. You don't have to keep them in when they're being drawn in ...

What does that mean for churches?

Some churches have deep waterholes. The teaching is sound, members enjoy rich and caring fellowship with each other, there's a vibrant ministry of prayer

But ..... it's hard for outsiders to come in and get to the water. The fences are just too high.

What might those fences be

they could be physical: buildings which are invisible inaccessible, or unwelcoming

they could be cultural: the use of language and forms which are incomprehensible to someone not raised in the church

they could be spiritual: an attitude that fears newcomers and the disruption they might bring

Other churches might have low or no fences. They've worked hard to fit in and connect with their surrounding culture. They present well and genuinely want new people to join them.

But when newcomers do come in ..... there's nothing for them to drink. The teaching, the fellowship, the spiritual life is shallow. The church is more of a social club than a place of transformational encounter with the Lord Jesus in the power of the Spirit.

My prayer is that all our churches, our schools and our welfare and justice ministries will be marked by low fences and deep waterholes.

In a diverse world my prayer is that they will be genuinely welcoming and accessible to outsiders, giving them the opportunity to drink deeply from God's living waters in a way and at a pace that is right for them.

And today's reading from John's gospel we are given a fresh insight into the deep waterholes that are ours in Jesus Christ

## Deep Waterholes

Because here in today's gospel reading are two precious gifts, two sources of life we are given in the gospel

### *The Prayer of the Son*

The first is the prayer of the Son. The setting of our passage is the night of Jesus' betrayal, the night before he will go to the cross bearing the weight of the world's sin on his shoulders and on his soul.

There's plenty of reasons why Jesus might be self-focused in such a context. Plenty of reasons why he might want some time out away from his friends.

But instead, at this point of impending crisis Jesus is supremely other-person centred.

In Chapter 13 he washes the smelly, dirty feet of his friends, giving them an example of humble service.

In Chapters 14 to 16 he teaches his friends, giving them a message of hope for the dark days ahead.

Now, in Chapter 17 he prays to His Father for his friends, and beyond them, for those who will believe in Him through their message.

Verse 9

"I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours."

Prayer is a wonderful gift from God.

In prayer we are invited to bring our needs to God, trusting that he the best of fathers who delights to give good gifts to his children.

In prayer we cast our worries on the one who is big enough to carry them, and in so doing discover a peace that surpasses mere human understanding.

In prayer we express our fellowship with each other by coming to God on each other's behalf.'

BUT — if we only see prayer as something we do we have failed to plumb the full depths of what we are given as believers.

Because before and beneath and beyond our prayers to God, there is this wonderful truth: Jesus prays, Jesus speaks to the Father on our behalf.

John 17 isn't a one-off; as the writer to the Hebrews puts it

"Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them."

If you are a believer in Jesus remember this:

When you are too tired or confused to know quite what to pray: Jesus is praying for you.

When you are facing temptations and struggles that seem too great for you to overcome: Jesus is praying for you.

These are deep waters indeed.

But there is a second gift, a second source of life in this passage which I'll call

### *The Protection of the Father*

You see it there in verses 10 and 11:

*"All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them." I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me ..*

Let's just pause there for a minute and ask a question: what would it look like to see that prayer answered? What kind of protection does the Father offer his children?

Is it protection from persecution? Will the Father ensure that his children never face opposition or exclusion or rejection because of their faith? Is that what it means?

Or is it protection for popularity. Will the Father ensure that his children are always highly regarded by their society, that they never have to deal with poor PR or misunderstandings?

Well, if you know anything about church history over the past 2,000 years ago you'll realise that there has never been a time when Christians have been free from opposition or been universally popular.

So what kind of protection is Jesus praying for?

Let's come back to Jesus' prayer.

protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one."

Protection here is grounded in the very being of God.

In the Bible names reveal being, and so when Jesus speaks of God's name, a name now given to Him we are given a window into the very being of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit dwelling together from eternity in perfect love and unity.

That is where our protection and our security is to be incorporated into the very being of God.

Barely a day passes when I don't hear Christians lamenting the perilous state of the church in contemporary Australia.

I've heard it this week as Christians expressed frustration at the level of compliance imposed by public servants who don't seem to get how churches function or appreciate the difference we make to our communities.

I've heard it this week as Christians express uncertainty about the proposed acquisition of Calvary Public Hospital and what that means for other institutions with a faith basis.

I hear those concerns and I empathise with them.

But I don't want us to be dominated by them.

Most of all I don't want to respond to them with fear.

To retreat into isolation and self protection, circling the wagons and hiding from the world.

Because church you have no reason for fear - Jesus, now risen and ascended to the right hand of the Father - is praying for you.

And church you have no need for self protection - the Father holds you secure in the love He shares with the Son and with the Holy Spirit.

So let's engage with our world - the world Jesus loves and for which he laid down his life.

Let's engage the world with his love and his truth.

Regardless of whether or not we get to run hospitals let's be agents of healing in our neighbourhoods and families.

Regardless of whether or not we get to run schools let's be messengers of good news.

Let's drink deeply of all that we are given in Jesus, and let's invite others to do the same - for another 75 years or until the Lord returns