



Closed Streams, Living Waters

Dr Andrew Clark-Howard

Season of Creation

Ezekiel 47:1-12 | John 4:5-14

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Our city has been alight with energy and excitement at the opening of the City Rail Link last weekend. Perhaps some of you used the new underground train to arrive this morning. If you did, or if you intend to travel home this way, you will enter into a station called Te Waihorotiu, named after the ancestral Waihorotiu stream and wetland system that once flowed through what is now central Auckland.

I lived my whole life in Tāmaki Makaurau before learning, only a few years ago, of the rushing waters which once flowed beneath Queen Street, covered up progressively in the late nineteenth century. Under bitumen, concrete, and piping—and now even alongside our very own metro system—flows the Waihorotiu, hidden from our sight. Named in relation to the Horotiu pā which once sat on what we now call Albert Park, entire generations of mana whenua and settler alike have now passed who have never seen this river flow.

An article titled “Ka Tū Te Mana o Waihorotiu” describing the context of a series of artwork from Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei artist Caine Taihia, describes a sober reality:

Of all of the original water ways within central Tāmaki, Waihorotiu is likely the most mistreated in the period since colonial settlement was formally established in 1840. The transition from being the very source of life and wellbeing in this valley to variously drain, waste receptacle, public health hazard and development nuisance has been remarkable.¹

When the first colonial Anglicans began meeting on this St Matthew's site in the 1850s and 60s, on this ridge looking down into the valley cut by Waihorotiu, they would still have had a clear view of the stream. By this point it was being channelled into a canal which often flooded and carried sewage.² By the 1870s, it had been enclosed beneath the developing city and remains as such to this day.

¹ “Ka Tū Te Mana o Waihorotiu: Stories Behind the Artwork,” *Tō Tātou Tāmaki Makaurau: Our Auckland* (18 December 2024), <https://ourauckland.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/news/2024/12/ka-tu-te-mana-o-waihorotiu-artwork-stories/>. See also: Meg Parsons, “Remembering Wai-Horotiu: Microhistory, Public Art, and Indigenous Environmental Justice in Tāmaki Makaurau” *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* 20, no. 4 (2025): 1348–71.

² You can see a photo of this canal on *Te Ara*: Adrian Humphris, “Streets and lighting – Building and funding streets,” *Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/photograph/24474/open-sewer-queen-street>.

Waters and streams are not abstractions, even if our urban environments often treat them as such. Water is life—and the wellbeing of our waters is tied to our own existence. Yet we live in a world abstracted from such sources. We live in a world in which life-giving water cannot always be assumed.

Our reading from the Prophet Ezekiel this morning describes a river flowing into a damaged world. Ezekiel speaks to a people in exile, a people who have been taken from their whenua and whose temple had been destroyed by the Babylonian Empire. In his vision, he begins to see waters flow from this now-lost temple, flowing from the altar as a trickle but growing into a great river. Finally, it reaches the basin of the Dead Sea, a body of water famed for its intense salinity, making it largely inhospitable to most animal and plant life. The stream of “living water,” however, brings flourishing to the trees which line its banks, the fish that teem in its waters, and the fruit which grows year-round.

Notice here the expansiveness of this vision. The flowing river restores not merely humanity but all of the other-than-human world. Far from being a vision of individual escape to heaven, Ezekiel describes a vision in which earth and all her creatures are renewed together in harmony and flourishing.

Lest we think this vision of restoration simply “solves” our own contemporary problems of ecological destruction and widespread loss—a spirituality which has no need for the “natural” world because it believes God will one day restore it regardless of our own actions—we must recall its original setting. This remarkable vision of ecological renewal is contrasted with the reality of the exile, where the temple itself lies in ruins and the land has been lost to a foreign empire. As Psalm 137 famously reads, this is a community who sit by “the waters of Babylon” and weep for their lost whenua. There is a gap between what is and what God promises, a gap between the ecological vision of restoration and the reality of destruction now.

In our reading from the Gospel of St John, we shift from Ezekiel's mythical river to a concrete location in Samaria, by Jacob's well, patriarch of both Jewish and Samaritan tradition.

This is no neutral space; as our reading tells us, “Jews do not associate with Samaritans” (v. 9b). Despite their shared ancestry, one of the major disagreements between Jews and Samaritans lay precisely in the proper place of worship: whether the temple itself should be located in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim. By the time Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, centuries of religious, ethnic, and historical hostility have separated their communities.

Jesus is thirsty and asks for a drink. The unnamed woman questions his intentions, and Jesus gives a cryptic reply. Out of the ensuing debate, Jesus speaks of living water, a gift of God that becomes a spring within a person, “gushing up to eternal life.” In Ezekiel, water flows outward and brings life to a dead landscape. In John, water is received and becomes a spring within a person. Both visions point beyond the immediate moment toward life that God gives.

But this is no neutral place. Jesus and the Samaritan woman encounter one another across a profound social and religious division. This is a place where thirst, identity, religion, history, and political division meet—and these divisions do not simply disappear. The promise of living water does not erase the contested realities of the world in which it is offered. What might this mean?

There are many kinds of thirst in our world today:

- There is physical thirst: the body's need for water, and access to clean water is far from equal across the world, marked by divisions of race, class, and culture that similarly divided Jesus' own day.
- There is ecological thirst: landscapes and ecosystems deprived of what they need to flourish. The land itself cries out—the thirst of streams like Te Waihorotiu which have been desecrated and covered up.
- There is social thirst: communities longing for justice, restoration, and peace in a world which knows no peace. Many of us have a clear sense of the injustices which surround us but see little way forward.
- And there is spiritual thirst: the human longing for God and for life that does not finally collapse into death. In times of crisis in particular, human beings look for God and can settle for easy answers of salvation and escape.

These thirsts sit beside one another, rubbing up against each other. Our ecological crisis is not going to be solved by telling people to have more faith. And easy appeals to spiritual hope will not magically repair our polluted rivers or destroyed ecosystems. Likewise, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman does not erase the real history of division between their communities.

While Jesus' promise of living water may seem larger than our present reality, that present reality remains real. Living waters run alongside closed streams. Vibrant rivers can still flow into dead seas.

And this is why the Christian hope looks beyond present reality, not as an escape from our circumstances—dire as they often are—but as a living witness against the death and destruction humans have often wrought.

Both our readings today seek to reach beyond what is immediately visible, announcing that death does not have the final word. And yet, in this very proclamation of living waters, we are met with the reality that this future is not here yet.

We live between Ezekiel's river and the Dead Sea, not yet seeing the renewal of the land. We live between Jesus' promise and the thirst that both he and the Samaritan woman experience beside Jacob's well. We live between the promise of eternal life and a world in which people still thirst, ecosystems still collapse, and communities remain divided.

We are left, then, not with the neat question, "How do we solve all of this?" nor even, perhaps, "How do we make Ezekiel's vision happen here in Aotearoa?" We might ask instead a more complicated question: "What does it mean to live now in a world that is not yet what God promises it will be?" Creation is wounded, and yet we are shown a river of life. People remain divided, and yet beside this Jacob's well, two others meet. We thirst and cry out, and yet are promised living water.

Perhaps one way to understand this indeterminable tension lies precisely in Christ's own thirst. Even while Jesus speaks of living water, he remains thirsty, and he experiences this unfulfillment of creation, even, perhaps, its pain. The one who offers the gift of God is himself in need of a drink. He receives from the woman what he cannot give himself in that moment. The giver of living water enters fully into the reality of human thirst.

Faith, then, is learning to live between the thirst we cannot deny and the life that is promised. It is learning neither to deny the wounds of creation nor to surrender to despair. It is learning to receive the living water of Christ while remaining attentive to the closed streams—like Te Waihorotiu—around us.

And faith, perhaps, means learning to accept the care and divine work that can be wrought in us by creation. When creation flourishes, so do its creatures, human and other-than-human. We live today, however, in a context in which the taiao is marked and marred, cut off from fullness of life. We have closed ourselves off from the sacramentality of creation and treated the earth with disgrace.

Faith, then, is learning to live with closed streams amidst living waters.