

***“In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believes on me, as the scripture has said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this he spoke of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)”—John 7:37-39.***

**THE WATER OF LIFE**  
**A Sermon by Theodor Zahn**

WE are keeping a spiritual feast. We, with all Christians on earth, meditate today and tomorrow on an invisible event in the history of spiritual life, while we thank God for His act and pray to Him for His gifts. Signs that could be both seen and heard were not wanting [lacking] at that Feast of Pentecost at Jerusalem to which we turn our gaze today. But the Spirit, who made His entry there and established a new life with creative power, was not in the rushing wind that filled the house. Nor were the fiery tongues that manifested themselves those with which all the members of that Pentecostal community praised the mighty works of God. A kindling ray, from the inaccessible heights of divine life, streamed down into the hidden depths of human life, and kindled there a fire from which a few bright sparks shot forth into the outer world. The accompanying signs, which were also visible to strangers, have vanished; and the fact itself, which we celebrate today, exists only for those who experience its inner working. The feast of the Spirit can be kept only by those who have become the children of that Spirit.

What a very different kind of feast that was which the Evangelist places before us on its last and most glorious day! The Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, at which we find Jesus in the midst of the throng at the Temple, was not a feast of the spirit but of nature. It was a joyful national festival on the completion of the fruit-gathering and the vintage. The people rejoiced for seven days in the earthly blessings given them by God. Everywhere--in the courtyards, on the flat roofs, in the streets--booths were made of green branches, in which families and their friends gathered together for festal meals. When they went to sacrificial services in the Temple, they carried palm-branches, wreathed with other foliage, and the finest fruits of the Holy Land in their hands. On each of the seven days a priest went down from the Temple mount with a golden vessel to the Pool of Siloam, accompanied by the Temple musicians and countless multitudes of those who had come to the feast. When the priest had filled his vessel with water from the well, all the people sang, “Draw water with joy from the wells of salvation.” Then they all returned in a solemn procession to the Temple. There the water was poured out on the altar of burnt offering. A pitcher of wine was also emptied, the water and wine being a thank offering to God.

And then, amidst loud cries of Hosanna and waving of palms, the endless procession wound round the altar. On the last day of the feast, which was also the most glorious, this procession took place seven times, as though the people could never weary of rejoicing in God’s gifts. It was a national festival, more easily understood by everyone than our festival of today, for men rejoiced over tangible blessings. It is true to many, even in our own town, that our Christian Whitsuntide has become more a festival of nature than of spirit. Men rejoice in the tender beauty of newly-awakened nature, men are more willing to rest under the green roof of spring foliage than under the stone roofs of rooms and churches. Who would wish to prevent them? And who blames those who take their pleasure therein? Is not all that is earthly pure and good when partaken of with thanksgiving to the Heavenly Giver?

But see! In the midst of the people who are feasting and rejoicing there stands a grave Man watching all this coming and going. On the last, the brightest and most glorious day of the feast, He goes to a spot where many must see Him and hear Him, right in the midst of the turbulent throng, among the masses who are satiated and drunken with festal joy, and cries with a loud voice: "*If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.*" Does He wish to disturb the feast? Does He wish to cloud the joy? Assuredly not; that was not His way. So familiarly did He associate with the joyful that He was reproached with the lack of that holy earnestness which marked John the Baptist. Besides, it was a sacred feast which God's people were keeping according to God's commandment.

Jesus Himself had come to Jerusalem to keep the feast with them. He blames nothing. He forbids nothing. But to that crowd drunk with joy He puts the question, "Is there no one among you who is athirst? The water that ye draw from the well is a noble gift of the Creator, but does it quite still the thirst that that same God has roused in your breasts? The branches and the fruit that ye carry in your hands, the foliage under which ye have been dwelling all these days, are witnesses to the goodness of God. But do not ye see how quickly they fade in your hands and above your heads? God's goodness endures eternally. But where are the gifts which ye can keep forever and which can make you eternal? Let him who thirsts for such blessings come unto Me and drink!"

He who thus cried at the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem is standing in the midst of us also, for we are assembled here in the blessed Name of Jesus Christ. He stands in the midst of Christendom separated and scattered in space, but gathered together in spirit in His Name. Unseen and unrecognized, also He stands among the thousands who in these days keep the Feast of Tabernacles but not Whitsuntide, though they have been named in His Name, and called to the life of the Spirit which Christ gives. He it is who today, even as yesterday, cries out in all the world, "*If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.*" Let him who would serve Him today in His community reply to Him with the confession, "Jesus Christ is the source of the life-giving Spirit."

[1] He is that source *only for the thirsty*. [2] He became that source in full measure only when *He was glorified and exalted*. [3] And He makes all who come to draw from Him into *wells of the Spirit to those around them*.

[1] The call of Jesus sounds out into all the world and to all nations that bear His name, and this call must sound ever louder and louder. But this call of invitation and this word of promise draw a distinction, and separate a certain class of men from all others from the very first--from those who are satisfied and at peace with themselves and the world. It is only the thirsty whom Jesus Christ invites to come to Him as the source from which they can draw spirit and life. Those who have eaten and drunk to the full must become thirsty before they can understand, and certainly before they can take to heart, what it means when a man who has trod this earth bears witness to a whole people, and lastly to all mankind, "I am the inexhaustible well from which all man's longing after life and spirit may be satisfied."

There are men, indeed, who for a time imagine and persuade themselves that they have enough, that there is no reason why they should wish for anything beyond their state of life. Who has not experienced some moments when all desire gave place to deep satisfaction, and nothing was further from his thoughts than to wish for change in his inner or outer position, whose only wish it was that it might last? But those moments did not last. The men who always give us the

impression that they do not wish to be anything more than they are, or to have anything which they do not already possess, are not those whom a wise man would envy. They deceive themselves, or they are deceiving us. Daily experience teaches us that such men do nothing good and nothing great.

Wherever anything that is good, great, and beautiful has been produced, it has always been the work of the thirsty souls, of the longing spirits of men who see the image of that which they ought to be far up above them, who reach out longingly towards it, and crave for strength to bear them up. Even the ordinary thirst for possession and enjoyment stimulates man's powers and spurs him on to work. The thirst also for honour and power forces man to self-denial, to self-sacrifice for the common weal. Neither is it otherwise in the realms of art and science. He who only takes up such work as a pastime does not succeed. It is only when the desire for unknown truth becomes a thirst for knowledge that the veils fall, and the ways to undiscovered worlds are laid bare.

But this is not the thirst that Jesus promises to quench. He speaks at the sacred feast in the name of God to the people of God. He speaks to those who in the holy festal songs of those days had both witnessed themselves, and had also heard again, that all that the earth gives and time takes away is not enough for man, but that there are, indeed, wells from which flow salvation from God and eternal life. He asks the people of God, when keeping the feast, if there are not some among them who are athirst for the living God. He asks us, too, who are now keeping Whitsuntide. And it is only when we are conscious of a longing for spirit and life, like the thirst of a weary wanderer or a labourer on a scorching day, it is only then that His invitation and His promise concern us.

How is it with us? To every Christian, indeed, it is self-evident; and no truth is so often preached in our Church, or so early impressed on the heart of every Christian child, as the truth that there is no good in us in the sight of that God in whom we live and move, and that we must seek the forgiveness of that merciful God in whom full forgiveness is to be found. And every Christian who has sought and has found this grace in the Son of God, who can speak of the forgiveness of sins as the ground of his soul's peace and the joy of his life, has yet a further longing, and a longing which is never completely stilled, that he may become worthy of such a state of grace and walk worthily therein. Earnest Christians are daily aware how much they fall behind their example. If we are upright in heart, we never cease hungering and thirsting for righteousness of life while on earth. And our Lord calls those blessed who thus hunger and thirst after righteousness. One day they shall be satisfied. Yea, blessed are they to whom righteousness is as their daily meat and drink, without which they cannot live. Blessed are they who know and so do, knowing that without righteousness they can neither have, nor hope for, true joy or eternal life.

But this is not yet all that a Christian longs for throughout his life; and this is not the right name for the blessing which Christ offers and promises at Whitsuntide to all who thirst. For why do we fall again and again so far below the standard that as Christians we set before ourselves? Why do we so often, with the best will, with a full knowledge of all that is right and good and under the most favourable circumstances, fail in joy in our work and in confidence that we are making progress in the path of sanctification? Yes, indeed, why do we in many an hour miss the certainty that we and our whole lives are dependent on the grace of God and that all must be for the best for us? The words of Christian truth in themselves do not help us; the acknowledgment of Christian doctrine does not make us the blessed children of God; and self-

accusations do not make us holy. It is the Spirit that we need. It is the Spirit only who can give us life. It is the Holy Spirit who teaches us to pray as well as to work, who awakens faith and kindles love, who must daily seal anew in our hearts the grace and truth of our God, and who then gives strength and energy to our actions.

He who thirsts for righteousness thirsts for the Holy Ghost, whether he knows and realizes it or not. But we ought to know and realize it. We ought not to rest content with complaints of our own weakness. Neither ought we to imagine that by all kinds of discipline and compulsion we can really help ourselves forward on that road to perfection in which we have been placed by Christ. The Lord, who has awakened in us a longing after perfect righteousness, has also promised that it shall be fulfilled. But not by the old way of the law, which did not lead to the goal, but by the new way that He has made for us. Not without Him, but through Him. Not in our own strength, which is pure weakness, but in His Spirit, which is the gift of His merciful love, and which has a power that can make us free.

Spirit, intellect! What noble words these are in the speech of the world! It is only of a very few that it can be said that they are really intellectual or possessed of great talent, and it seems almost a part of the order of nature that most men should make no such pretensions or long for such gifts. So it is, too, with the Holy Ghost, who made His entry into the community of the faithful at the Feast of Pentecost. Many men seem to think that He was only sent many hundreds of years ago to prepare a few apostles and prophets for wonderful words and works, and then, later on, now and again, to inspire an isolated hero of the faith that he might become a reformer of the Church. But the Holy Ghost was to be poured out on all flesh, and to be given to all who longed for righteousness and life.

Man cannot preserve his natural life without the Spirit of God, who since the creation has preserved the life of all creatures and ever begets it anew; no more can the Christian live the Christ-life in his own strength. The Holy Spirit, who formed the disciples of Jesus into one community, still ever upholds that community, so that in spite of the weakness of many of its members it is nevertheless a tabernacle of God with men. The same Pentecostal Spirit upholds and alone supports the spiritual life of each individual Christian. Without that Spirit our whole life is either unchristian or no life at all. Without Him, as Paul says, we cannot even call Jesus Christ Lord in truth. That which is in us still of that Spirit who has worked in us since the day of our baptism, that it is which makes us long for Him, and invites us especially today to listen to His call: *"If any man thirst, let him come unto Me."* It impels us, too, today to answer: "Lord, we thirst. We need that which Thou hast in full measure. We come to Thee according to Thy Word, give us to drink."

[2] Yes, today when we hear His voice, let us open our hearts to Him. It is not the preacher's imagination which arbitrarily transfers the account of the Feast of Tabernacles to our Whitsuntide, and it is not the listeners' imagination which throws their thoughts back to that day, till it seems to them as though Jesus were really standing among us and inviting us to let Him quench the thirst of our souls from His Holy Spirit. He is verily and indeed standing in the midst of us, as John saw Him standing in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, which are a picture of His community on earth. And it is only now, when He is exalted unto heaven, that what He then said is fulfilled, and that He has become verily and indeed the life-giving Spirit to all who long for Him.

Even when as Man He mixed with other men, our Lord spoke of Himself and invited men to

Himself, as no man of sane mind before or after Him has ever spoken of himself or invited others to himself. And everyone who treasures the faintest spark of Christian faith in his heart feels certain that the good and lowly Jesus did not blaspheme presumptuously when He said of Himself what the God of the prophets had also said of Himself, to His people, that He was the living source for all who thirsted. They believe that by these wonderful words, as by hundreds of other words of similar meaning, He imparted holy truth in tender love to His brethren.

Even then there was springing up in Him an inexhaustible well of holy life. The Spirit of God dwelt in Him and worked in Him, as He can only in the Holy One unquenched, undefiled, and unhindered. God had called a second creation into being when He sent His Son. He had thereby established a new birth for mankind. Jesus was verily in earnest when He invited thirsty souls to run no more to deceptive wells in which human skill had collected unwholesome water, but to come to Him who had something better to offer, and who had enough for all. They who came to Him and hung on His lips were already blessed. His words full of life and spirit begat new thoughts in them, and strengthened their holy resolutions. His unswerving trust in God worked with infectious power on His disciples. For His sake they plucked up courage to look to God as their Heavenly Father, and in love for Jesus they felt new love for God. Nevertheless, the Spirit was not yet in them as long as Jesus lived in the flesh. Their relationship to Him was essentially that of man to man, in spite of all the devotion on both sides. They were still separated by the insurmountable barriers in which the life of human beings is held and confined.

And do you not think that our Lord must have painfully experienced that which so many highly gifted human minds have felt and bemoaned, that it was impossible to find kindred spirits with whom to share His thoughts; fellow-workers who could be on an equality with Himself? It pained Him that He could not see His strength mighty in His weak friends, that He must always remain so highly exalted above those whom He had stooped so low to serve in love. He longed for the hour when, freed from the shackles of human nature, He could pour forth the riches of His life and of His strength on the poor and weak. Even in Him this life and strength were fettered as long as He lived on earth, by the bonds and limits of created life. Yea, the Evangelist is not afraid to use the bold words of our text, *"The Holy Ghost was not yet given, because that Jesus Christ was not yet glorified."*

The Spirit of God is indeed an eternal Spirit. We pray to Him with the Father and the Son, and when He dwells in our hearts, God dwells in us and we live in God. But this eternal Spirit of God has come nearer to us, yea, He became another for us, when, in the holy Man Jesus, He found a vessel which allowed itself to be completely filled with Him. And again, He came nearer to us, and became another in His efficacy for us men, when He completely filled this vessel and made it like unto Himself, and when He led the body of the crucified in transfigured form from the grave and bore Him up to heaven. Since then, only, has the well of living water, which was opened for the world in Jesus Christ, been ready to pour out its inexhaustible riches over all the thirsty land. Since then, only, has the new Holy Spirit come to earth to work there effectively, creating, upholding, and completing all that is good in the community of Christ

It is not our high or lowly, our wise or foolish thoughts; it is not our real or pretended inspiration, the strength of our wills, our faith or love or hope, which forms us into a community and preserves us in communion with our invisible Head in heaven. It is His Spirit who has taken up His abode in our midst, and who has carried on His work in the unfathomable depths of our own being since the day of our baptism, who awakens in us whatever there may be of faith and love, of true thought and real inspiration.

This is a great mystery. Who will deny it? Who can say that he has fathomed it, and can talk of it with the same feeling of certainty with which we speak of the perceptible objects of our daily experience? But, again, a great secret of the love of God and our salvation, which meets us at our Whitsuntide feast, has not been made known to us because of our doubting thoughts, but that we may praise the God of love who gives us more than we can ask or understand. This much at least we can understand: That we should no longer be able to believe in His love, if the invitation and offer of Jesus had proved to be a deception. We could not believe that God in His pitying love had sent His Son to us into the world that we might have life in Him, when at the same time we were obliged to confess to ourselves that God had taken out of the world and had shut up in heaven the holy and immortal life which had come to light in Jesus Christ, and that here below as heretofore men must come and go, live and die, sinful and unclean, weak and mortal; and that even those who had set their hopes on Christ were richer only in those claims and hopes which God had indeed awakened but which He had not fulfilled.

But it is the joy of the faithful community, on this day, that God has fulfilled that which He promised by sending His Son and by the mouth of His Son. The Lord Jesus, who when on earth was already a source of living Spirit, became a well of life-giving Spirit when He went to the Father and received power to impart His immortal life to the mortal and the dying. Today He stands in the midst of His people and cries to the multitude, *"If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink!"*

Today, as then, this is much to ask of those who do not yet know Him personally, and have not as yet experienced any proofs of His love and power in themselves. Indeed, our Lord Himself does not conceal this. To show that it is not enough that those whom He thus invites to Himself should be in want and feel their want, He says, "Whosoever believes on Me." Trust in Him is necessary, if we would come to Him. But Jesus expects that the thirsty will be willing to come to the well, that those in need of salvation will readily put their trust in Him.

Now in these days, wherever His invitation is clearly heard again, there is always some degree of faith in Him; there is some experience of His riches; there is already a community which lives by His Spirit in so far as it lives at all. Therefore the only question is, Do any thirst? It is they who gladly hear His friendly invitation. It is they who are ready to believe that the Lord in heaven is rich unto all who call upon Him; and they, too, willingly allow themselves to be won by the promise of the Lord, *"He that believes in Me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water."*

[3] First and last, it is always our own need, the poverty of our lives, the void in our hearts, the sluggishness of our wills, coldness of feeling, wandering thoughts and distraction of mind which make us thirst for the Spirit of the Lord; and it is for peace and joy that we first pray when we draw near to the well of the Spirit. And with these the Holy Ghost can fill even the heart of an anchorite [religious recluse]. But we are not anchorites, and the Spirit of Whitsuntide is a Spirit who loves fellowship and establishes fellowship. If for a short space He leads one and another into solitude, as He led Jesus after His baptism into the wilderness, He will lead them back again to fellowship with men, and to work with their fellows. The flesh separates more than it unites; the mind of the flesh is self-seeking; the desire of the flesh is enjoyment which breeds envy and strife.

The Spirit, on the other hand, unites those who by self-seeking have been estranged from one another. The Spirit of God lays hold of a man, drawing him out of the narrowness of his own

being, leading him up to God and towards all that comes down from God as a good gift, and destined for the good of all. The Spirit of God also opens the eyes of men, that they may once more realize the true nature and object of all these gifts and possessions, and never again imagine that they would be richer and happier if they could keep for themselves only that which God intended for all. They must seek their happiness and find it in fellowship with those whose possessions increase in love's exchange, and whose earthly task consists of work for the community. Thus the Holy Spirit of Whitsuntide heals and consecrates all communities in whose members He can find a place--in wedlock, in the family, in friendship and among fellow-labourers. Indeed, a state and nation in which there are many children of God will find to its own advantage that the Spirit of Jesus Christ is the Spirit of fellowship, of work for all, of self-sacrifice for the common good.

But there was *one* community which this Spirit did not find in existence, but called into being Himself--the community of the faithful, the Church of God. In her, above all, since that first Whitsuntide, the uniting power of the Holy Ghost has been preserved. As long as Jesus walked on earth with His apostles, they disputed among themselves which of them was the greatest. They asked what the difference would be in the reward given to those who had followed Him from the first, and to those who had been converted later. They demanded the places of honour in heaven for themselves. After the day of Pentecost each one held the others in higher esteem than himself, and not only the apostles, but all the members of the rapidly increasing community were of one heart and of one soul: *"Neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common."*

But this did not refer only to earthly goods, but primarily to all those gifts which are summed up in the one gift of the Holy Ghost. They are given to us in order that we may hand them on, that we may make them fruitful for the community, that we may exchange them one with another, and by that exchange may increase our possessions. We should well be justified in admonishing all Christians so to act, as I said, that every one should stir up the gift that is in him, and prove by word and deed, each according to his ability, that he is a child of God.

But more precious and more efficacious than exhortation, however well intended, is the word of promise which we have heard today from the lips of Jesus; and without faith in this word all exhortation giving evidence of the Spirit would only cause misunderstanding. This Lord and Saviour, who will give to drink to all who are thirsty and come to Him from the well which is Himself, promises also that we shall become wells of living water to all who are around us. He has promised, and He will do it. And He does it really whenever any man, in faith on Him, makes room for His Spirit. The Spirit also who bears witness in our hearts that we are the children of God, and seals to us the grace and truth of God, causes our mouths also to overflow with that of which the heart is full while He makes us His instruments. Yes, in this infirm and impure body in which we carry on our life, the Spirit of the holy God and of His Son will dwell and rule so that His power will break forth in the glance of our eyes, in the words of our mouths, in the work of our hands. Thus our life here will be like a stream on the banks of which all will grow and flourish to the glory of God and the joy of men.

My beloved, there are men of whom this is a true likeness, and it is not only among the great in the kingdom of God, among the prophets and heroes that they are to be found. The Pentecostal Spirit was poured out on all flesh wherever He was admitted. The servants and handmaidens also shall not only be the children of God but the instruments of His Spirit. Even a tiny well can send forth pure, clear water, and produce life and growth around it. This is promised to all who

believe in Jesus, and, thirsting, come to Him that He may give them to drink of His Holy Spirit. We cannot, in apparent modesty, renounce all claim on this great promise; for that would mean renouncing the Spirit Himself, without whom we are spiritually dead. And if, above all, we acknowledge our poverty of spirit, and that we have no power over those around us, we shall then become certain that we have the gift of the Holy Spirit, for we shall realize that our words and works are not mere patchwork of our own fashioning, but that they are the channels of the life-giving Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Oh that we only had courage to believe the promise of the Lord! We should then experience so much more of the working of that Spirit who on the first Christian Whitsunday transformed all the members of the community into eloquent witnesses of His power. We need not fear pride, for the Holy Ghost dwells only with the lowly, and quickly forsakes the haughty. No one who possesses Him can boast of Him; He and His gifts cannot be bought. If He is not possessed, we can only pray for Him and accept the gift from the Lord, who says, "*If any man thirst, let him come unto Me.*" Amen.