My task as, I understand it, is to offer some reflections upon water: water seen not primarily as a natural resource in increasingly short supply, but water as it is viewed in Scripture, in our liturgical practice, and through the eyes of such persons as Francis of Assisi, who view the world and its creatures – including humankind – as sacrament rather than commodity, and as gift rather than possession.

Theology and its embodiment, which is what we mean when we speak of spirituality, involves how we live: that is the choices we make and our responses to the demands and decisions history sets before us. We embody our theology as individuals, as an ecclesial household, in our local communities, our nation and as part of a global community in which the wellbeing of “this fragile earth our island home” is the responsibility of us all, particularly those to whom “much has been given.”

Let me begin my reflections in what may seem a somewhat unusual place: the small town of Barrington, New Hampshire. As is the case with many New England communities, a spring of water bubbles up from the earth in Barrington. Its pure water flows forth night and day and is accessible to all. Passing by at any hour you will see cars and pickup trucks parked along the road and a gaggle of people filling bottles and plastic jugs from the constant stream. Several years ago a French bottling company approached the town with an offer to buy the spring, their aim being to bottle the water and sell it in Europe. The matter is still unresolved and this prospect is being fought hard by those who want to preserve the resource for the area. What had once been nature’s gift to all who cared to drink has become a highly contested prize in the global market.

Not unrelated to this tale are two recent experiences of my own. Several weeks ago, while traveling along the New Jersey Turnpike, I stopped at a rest area and discovered that neither of the two water fountains was working. The only alternative was to buy a bottle of water and the choices were bewildering. I counted five brands of water at various prices, sizes and from places of origin both domestic and foreign. And, of course, there were the possibilities of flavor and a variety of vitamins and energy boosters I could take in with my water. And all this in the interest of simply slaking my thirst.

These rest stop choices, however, were as nothing compared to the high-end water experience I had at a restaurant in Philadelphia called the Waterworks. The restaurant is so named because it occupies a building abutting the Schuylkill River, and in a former life it served as the water pumping station for the city. The restaurant is quite upscale
and the menu includes in discreet italic print along side the various culinary offerings recommendations for just the appropriate brand of water. The language is not quite as extreme as “full-bodied with a hint of oak suffused with wild strawberries” but it is not far removed. And some of the prices are not unlike those of a fine wine and you can easily spend up to 100 dollars to accompany your meal with just the perfect water. In this instance water has moved beyond a commodity and ascended into the realm of luxury goods and status symbols. You can imagine my sense of righteous pleasure when the waiter asked for our water preference and I answered with the monosyllable: “Tap!”

Let us imagine that I am entertaining a very special guest at that linen-draped table at the restaurant, a prominent theologian of the 3rd Century by the name of Tertullian. My guest looks up from his menu and having heard my exchange with the waiter, exclaims: “Where Christ is, there is water.” The waiter and I are somewhat surprised, and Tertullian continues. At creation, he reminds us, drawing from Genesis, “water became the resting place of the Spirit. The water of the flood and the dove dispatched by Noah from the ark heralded peace to the earth. The waters of the Red Sea proclaimed that the Gentiles are free from the present world by means of water.” (Our theologian has really warmed to the topic now.) “Moses sweetened a desert spring by throwing in a piece of wood: that tree was Christ! The healing waters of Bethsaida which used to administer temporal health, now restore health which is eternal.”

Tertullian by now has our full attention. He continues. “Christ was baptized in water. At the marriage of Cana he made use of water to perform the first of his signs and reveal his glory. Jesus invited those who thirst to come to his everlasting water. When teaching charity he approves of a cup of water offered to a little one as one of the works of affection. By his own choice he crossed water. With water he makes himself a servant to his disciples. He continues his witness to baptism right onto his passion as water bursts forth from his side.”

And then, moving toward his finale, Tertullian speaks of our own baptism declaring, “We being little fishes, as Jesus Christ is one great Fish, begin our life in water, and only when we abide in the water are we safe and sound.” At this point I am imagining that our waiter might have excused himself, more fully instructed in water as salvific than he could ever have imagined.

Well, what we have here are two very different perceptions of water. What I have tried to do is juxtapose the view of water in our present environment – where it is reduced to a commodity to be bought and sold – with an early Christian perspective. The patristic writers understood water as a sign of God’s care and mercy extended to humankind, and also as the medium in which and through which “Jesus the one great Fish”
revealed his glory and continues to draw us – little fish – into the ever unfolding dynamic of his death and resurrection. The confluence of biblical allusions and metaphors reflected in patristic ethical instruction and sacramental practice – and Tertullian is but one witness – led to a rich and expansive, or one might say overflowing, understanding of water in the economy of God and the mystery of salvation. This confluence is most clearly expressed in the prayers recited over the font in the course of the Easter Vigil, many of which have come down through the centuries and served to inspire contemporary compositions, one of which is the thanksgiving over water in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.

Here I am mindful that this Mollegen Forum is taking place within the Great Fifty Days of Easter, and that the risen Christ, according to the longer ending of Mark, dispatches the eleven “to go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.” Not just to all nations as in Matthew, but to the whole creation, therefore including “our Sister water who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste,” as St. Francis of Assisi declares in his Canticle of the Creatures.

St. Francis’ perspective on water can be instructive for us today as we look at our topic. As a result of his intense and intimate companionship with Christ, Francis saw all things and all persons including those most marginalized – and in his day these were the lepers – as revelatory of Christ. Everything spoke of and bore witness to God’s goodness and mercy. The tiniest insect to the highest mountain participated in the mystery of God’s self-disclosure most fully expressed in the Incarnation. The Word made flesh in Jesus means that the world around us is Christic to its very core. The second person of the Trinity, according to Scripture and the Great Tradition, is intimately involved in the unfolding mystery of creation.

For Francis water creation in fulfilling its purpose – which in the case of water is being useful and precious in its lifegivingness – is an act of praise: “Glorify the Lord, O springs of water, seas and streams...praise him and highly exalt him forever,” we sing in the course of Morning Prayer. Water glorifies the Lord by being what God intended water to be, a sacrament – an outward and visible sign of God’s desire revealed in Christ to impart and sustain life.

In an early account of Francis’s life with his brother friars there is a passage in which we are told: Next to fire he had a singular love for water through which holy penance and tribulation is symbolized and by which the filth of the soul is washed clean and because of which the first cleansing of the soul takes place through the waters of Baptism. Because of this, when he washed his hands, he chose a place where the water that fell to the ground would not be trampled underfoot.
To withhold or contaminate water; to be unconscious or deliberately unaware of brothers and sisters who lack water and all else that upholds their wellbeing and dignity, is to stand against the very One under whom this nation of ours has placed itself: the one whom we invoke so freely with the self assured confidence of those who feel that they are specially privileged and are largely unburdened by the weight of responsibility to attend to the cry of the thirsty and the poor.

I speak here of those who thirst not simply for water to drink, but for an equitable sharing of resources. Such a sharing will demand on the part of many of us a transformation of consciousness such that we regard the world around us as gift rather than possession. This gift has been given not just to the rich and technologically advanced nations. It is intended for the flourishing of the whole human family and all living things.

Unfortunately, however, according to one estimate, approximately 80 percent of all diseases and one-third of the deaths in the developing world are the result of contaminated water. This statistic leaves aside the whole question of sustained drought which plagues vast portions of the globe which are least able to address the problem.

Designer water at $100 a bottle in an upscale Philadelphia restaurant is a cruel and bitterly ironic contrast to a battered tank truck lurching along dusty roads in Malawi carrying water to a drought stricken village where people and fields lie prostrate in the unrelenting heat of the midday sun. “Sister water who is so very useful and humble and precious and chaste” is nowhere to be seen.

Not only are many of the world’s people groaning under the burden of extreme poverty and disease but, as Paul tells us in the letter to the Romans “the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now,” waiting for its own redemption.

And I might say here parenthetically that the devastation of our planet, “this fragile earth, our island home,” occasioned by our greed, self-interest and uncaring, is the external manifestation of our own interior barrenness and poverty of soul. In the groaning of abused creation we hear external expression of our own interior disorder and selfishness.

The great flood described in Genesis which covered the face of the earth was brought about because “the Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth.” The exact nature of that wickedness is never defined. Can we not therefore ask if our own wickedness with regard to the environment is just as much a cause of violent changes in weather patterns with their attendant natural disasters, as was the
wickedness and evil, the inclinations of the human heart that provoked the flood in Noah’s day?

Global warming attended by severe changes in weather patterns is a reality as is the fact that we, along with other nations, must acknowledge responsibility for these warming trends owing to our profligate and undisciplined use of the earth’s resources. Does God, once again, regret that he made humankind – only this time around God does not need to devastate the earth. We are quite capable of doing it by ourselves.

With all of this in mind it becomes even more urgent for us as Christians to remember that all things have come into being through the Word who became flesh and lived among us, as we are told in the prologue to John’s gospel. “Without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life…”

A similar note is sounded by Paul in 1st Corinthians in which he declares “there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” And so it is that when we proclaim the Church’s faith in the words of the Nicene Creed we confess “we believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ…Through him all things were made.”

We might, therefore, reverse the order of Tertullian’s declaration, “Where there is Christ, there is water,” and say instead: “Where there is water, there is Christ” – in the full force of Christ’s enduring creative and life-giving presence.

It is also important for us to remember that as Anglican Christians our common prayer is the articulation of our theology. Therefore we must ask ourselves: how does what we pray over the water of the font inform us in our present crisis? How does what we pray over water bring us to a new consciousness and respect for water? How does this lead us to a new commitment to using our water resources for the well being of our world and the full flourishing of both its people and the whole of creation?

The thanksgiving over the water in the rite of Holy Baptism is precisely that: a thanksgiving. First and foremost, it is a thanksgiving to God “for the gift of water.” Then with a series of prepositions: over it, through it, in it, by it, it speaks of creation and salvation, including our own salvation through baptism, brought about by water and the Spirit. Curiously, the prayer makes no mention of Noah and the ark in which eight persons “were saved through water” as the writer of First Peter observes, going on to say “And baptism which this [the flood] prefigures, now saves you…” The various allusions to water contained in the prayer point back to and expand upon the opening declaration. “We thank you, Almighty God for the gift of water.”
Perhaps the most fundamental understanding of water as God’s gift through the mediation of the Word has to do with the fact that the waters hovered over by the Spirit in creation are integral to our own creation as human beings. We are water, our very bodies are largely water, and the functioning of our cells is dependent upon water, as are the climatic conditions which sustain and support life. If Christ the eternal Word is the agent of life, as we are told in Scripture, then one of the most concrete aspects of that life is the presence and availability of water.

The Bible, the story of our creation and recreation is engulfed in water. At its beginning, in the Book of Genesis the Spirit moves over the water and God speaks all things into being. Jesus in the Gospel of John speaks of himself as the source of living water and invites all who are thirsty to come and drink. At its conclusion, in the Book of Revelation the One seated on the throne declares, “See I am making all things new…I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.” Below the level of metaphor and hyperbole we need to see and hear a stark and fundamental declaration of what is, and what God in Christ through the agency of the Spirit intends and desires for all living things, namely that thirst be assuaged and life be abundant and full.

Here it is again: water not as a possession, a commodity, a source of economic advantage for some at the expense of others but a gift, an outpouring of divine love – an outpouring that reflects Christ’s yearning for the wellbeing and full flourishing of the whole creation of which we, with our fragile humanity, are an intimate part.

Paul talks about our being limbs of Christ’s body. A body cannot exist without water. By the living water of Christ’s Spirit, and the abundant life which flows from his cross and resurrection, Christ - through whom all things came into being – draws all people and all things together in the deathless embrace of his reconciling love. Through the waters of baptism Christ takes our lives into his own risen life, and through us the Risen One continues the outworking of his ministry of reconciliation. Water: how we use it, share it, reverence it – as did St. Francis, and find ourselves transformed and healed in our relationship to it and all creation, is integral to authentic discipleship and our own bearing witness to the resurrection.

I have to say here that the Bible can also be problematic. I believe one of the most dangerous and unfortunate verses in the Bible is God’s address to Adam and Eve: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” If God had had any idea how literally we would take the command to subdue and dominate, I am sure that he might not have put it that way, and I say he because
subduing and dominating are very much masculine expressions of power. Perhaps Wisdom, who we are told in the Book of Proverbs, was beside God as a master worker beside creation and was present when God “established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command,” perhaps Wisdom, who was “daily God’s delight,” if she had spoken, would have used the language of mutuality and reverence and respect in describing our relationship to the world in all its potentiality and fruitfulness.

I recently came across a drawing entitled “The banquet” in which men, women and children of various nationalities and races are depicted hand in hand encircling a globe ringed round by water, illuminated by the sun, bearing the fruits of the earth. It is accompanied by a quotation from a Russian Orthodox theologian which reads: “All the food of this world is divine love made edible.” Can we not say that water that sustains life and growth, our own and that of the world around us, an outpouring of that same divine love?

I very much hope that this forum and all that we have yet to hear and learn will lead us and others to a renewed sense of our world, not as a thing to be dominated but as a vast web of relationships in which sun and moon, fire and water are seen as brothers and sisters – part of a cosmic family brought into being by the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit who continues to move over the waters, “bringing forth life and giving growth, seed for sowing and bread for eating.”

May our present crisis provoke the possibility of blessing, and may the words of the psalmist who praises God for water’s goodness and lifegivingness to all creation become a song that all can sing:

Bless the Lord, O my soul; O Lord my God, how excellent is your greatness! You are clothed with majesty and splendor.

You have set the earth upon its foundations, so that it never shall move at any time.

You covered it with the Deep as with a mantle; the waters stood higher than the mountains.

At your rebuke the waters fled; at the voice of your thunder they hastened away.

They went up into the hills and down to the valleys beneath, to the places you had appointed for them.

You set the limits that they should not pass; they shall not again cover the earth.
You send the springs into the valleys; they flow between the mountains.

All the beasts of the field drink their fill from them, and the wild asses quench their thirst.

Beside them the birds of the air make their nests and sing among the branches.

You water the mountains from your dwelling on high; the earth is fully satisfied by the fruit of your works.

You make grass grow for flocks and herds and plants to serve mankind;

That they may bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden our hearts.

Oil to make a cheerful countenance, and bread to strengthen the heart.

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