

“In a barren and dry land where there is no water” Psalm 61

Recently I caught a television news feature on the ‘vanishing’ Dead Sea. The special report called attention to a modern, ecological disaster taking place in our time. The great biblical Dead Sea, backdrop to so much of our faith tradition, is rapidly receding. The water level has been dropping for several decades, at a current rate of as much as two feet per year.

The report both jogged my memory and sparked some reflection.

I recalled that during my first visit to the region in December 1989 that the waters of the Dead Sea had lapped beaches of resort spas with delighted vacationers wading into the unique mineral waters and bobbing like corks on the surface of the blue/green water. The mineral content of the water is about 10 times the salt content of sea water in our oceans. This natural wonder is caused by the natural draining of water into the deep basin which becomes the Dead Sea. It is the lowest place on earth not covered by water- some 1800 feet below sea level. The Dead Sea is fed by the waters of the River Jordan which progressively fall down the great Rift Valley, into this depression, and then sit there.... Much of it evaporating under the intense desert sun and in many places forming rich mineral deposits.

Then, I remembered my most recent visit to the region, in the spring of 2000, just eleven years later. The same beach that I had observed in 1989 was now about a half mile away from the resort. The lower portion of the Dead Sea was cut off from the main northern section, as if there were now two lakes, or at least a lake and a pond. From what I could see on the television report, the situation as been exacerbated in the past years. Now, there is practically no lower Dead Sea and the beach is about a mile away from the hotel. The Dead Sea is dying. At the current rate, there won't be a Dead Sea in fifty years.

Why? In support of a very successful cosmetic industry, unique minerals are being extracted from the waters of the Dead Sea. Global Warming certainly accelerates evaporation of its water. But the real cause is much more basic and indisputable. The Dead Sea is drying up simply because the waters of the River Jordan, which feeds the sea, have been diverted for irrigation and to support the population of the region. Indeed, the desert is blooming throughout the region. Tropical fruit such as bananas are successfully grown where four decades ago, there was only desert.

So, there seems to be a choice to be made: should the precious fresh waters of the River Jordan be used for agriculture and to sustain life in the region, or should they be allowed to flow naturally down to the Dead Sea?

This seems to me to be an important metaphor as we consider our lives. Truth be told, we have also diverted huge amounts of our precious human resources. We have successfully used our resources to build, to prosper, to feed, and to enjoy. We are so successful, at least in terms of the quality and lengthening of our lives. Yet, are we really so successful? And at what cost? Do we have any resources, any energy left over for our

spiritual lives? Is our sea, the place where we have encountered God, shrinking and evaporating?

These are truly Advent questions. For at no time in the year are we so caught up in the paradox of consumption as we now are...and for the sake of celebrating the Nativity of Christ!

I don't have lots of answers. Sometimes, I long for a simple, uncomplicated life and a much quieter Christmas. But, I am unwilling to give up all that I enjoy. I am unwilling to give up the joys of this lovely season, including all the 'stuff'. I can try to reign in the excess, slow down, and back away from the table. I keep saying to myself, "Less is more"! But I sense that the waters are still being steadily diverted.

So, these weeks before Christmas which the Church calls the season of Advent are for me a brief time for as much retreat as possible. For daily times of quiet. For checking in on my most important relationships. For balancing receiving with giving. For remembering that I need to cherish the great sea and not take it for granted. The prophets have always said the same thing: there is still time to change course, to alter our priorities. But, the time may be less and less. And we dare not take the sea for granted.

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