

Water Water!

Phil Jump reflects on our long hot summer and the flooding of the Thai footballers' caves, and on how shortage and flooding can be a matter of life and death. He shows from Scripture that it is a divine and noble management task to contain the harmful influence of the waters.

I live in the North West of England, which means I am suddenly faced with putting this article together without the aid of a hosepipe! This is the consequence of a recent spell of unusually (and delightfully!) hot, dry and sunny weather – or at least that's how I see it. Others, who have taken to social media or provided the ubiquitous “vox-pops” for regional news programmes, blame it on the failure of the water companies, corporate greed, leaks in the system, government under-investment, poor planning, lack of customer service, and so I could go on – in fact the only two things that seem to have escaped the finger of blame (for once!) are the E.U. and/or Brexit.

Water seems to be very much in the news at the moment, for while the reservoirs of northern England have been seeping ever lower, stories of the bravery and ingenuity of a team of British rescue divers (along with individuals of several other

nationalities) are also populating our evening bulletins. The plight of the young Thai footballers has been an international concern, and while we can delight at the success of their rescue, there is also a tinge of irony to these two stories. While the UK authorities are struggling to cope with a lack of water, in Thailand the problem was having too much of it!

At one level, water is a completely innocuous substance, yet our ability or inability to control its behaviour and availability can be a matter of life and death, despite the advances and sophistications of our modern world. It is notable that God's relationship with water is one that our Scriptures portray as defining the measure of his greatness and power. The Old Testament Psalmist speaks of waters being tamed, controlled and commanded as expressions of majesty, while in the New, Jesus leaves his disciples in awe after commanding a storm to be still.

It seems to me that our faith has a key role in giving us a truer perspective on things, so the point of exploring faith and work is to give us a more appropriate take on the world of business and commerce. What then, might our recent pre-occupations with water have to teach us?

Firstly, it might remind us of the blessing and benefit of work. Those Psalms remind us that it is a truly divine and noble task to contain the harmful influence of the waters and protect those in peril at their rising. Sure, many of those international divers described what they do as a hobby; a way in which, as cave divers, they are always there for one another. But the equipment that they used, the logistics needed to get it all in place and the processes of organisation and planning to make it all happen are all the fruits of human enterprise. If work is a sacrament, then here is one example that

The moment British divers reached the boys lost for 10 days in the Thailand cave



Photo: Sky News



Low water levels on Dove Stone Reservoir on Saddleworth Moor near Oldham in July 2018

resonates with much of the more traditional language of our worship and proclamation.

And if there was one thing we learned as we waited for the rescue of the trapped footballers, it was the importance of management. This was not simply a matter of donning some SCUBA gear, grabbing one of them and hauling him to safety, but required a meticulous process of planning and co-operation. This might be usefully remembered next time our media outlets portray managers as simply fat-cat executives; an unnecessary overhead to be culled whenever cost savings are called for.


Yet management can't do everything. This is something that many water customers in the North-West don't seem to grasp. Why can't they transmit millions of litres of fluid across thousands of miles of pipes without spilling a single drop? Why can't they maintain an absolutely constant supply of clean, safe fully-treated drinking water through

massive fluctuations in supply and demand? Why can't they just build more reservoirs? Just as we can sometimes undervalue the benefits of business, we can also be guilty of thoughtless over-expectation. The simple truth is that we are still mere mortals, subject to forces and patterns of nature over which we have little control. As the Psalmist reminds us, only God can turn on and off the waters of the upper chambers at will! (Psalms 33:7, 65:9-13, 77:13-19).

But there is a serious point to be made here. Popularism is more than just a political reality, and one of its side-effects seems to be an increasing volume of narratives that are ready to dismiss and condemn the world of business, the moment they fail to meet our self-defined expectations, irrespective of how reasonable they are. Business is intended to release us from being subject to the forces of nature; to undergird our belief in a Godless world, and woe betide it when it fails!

If we are to see the brightest and best continuing to be attracted to world of

business, it needs to be an environment where media and political activists treat them with realism and respect, and not simply the object of tirade or abuse, largely designed as a ratings booster, when the slightest flaw in their activities is detected.

I am not saying that my local utilities company is beyond reproach on every front, but the reason I can't use my hosepipe right now is because it hasn't rained properly for weeks, not because of a catalogue of incompetency and corruption on the part of the people whose skills and endeavours provide me with safe, clean running water every day, despite the dangerous unpredictability of this core commodity. And while divers shrug their shoulders and say "It's just what we do" – let's not lose sight of the possibilities and benefits when human endeavour, courage and ingenuity are harnessed for common good. That's why it's good for us to maintain our faith in business! 



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