The poet Philip Larkin wrote:

“If I were called on
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.”

Nearly all religions make use of water. The Book of Genesis links the origins of humanity with the springing up of water. Our emergence from dry dust is linked to the flowing of water. Jesus began His ministry by emerging from the water of the Jordan. Water was such a powerful image that Early Christians thought that all water was blessed.

At the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA two years ago, as you entered the hall in Portland, Oregon, commissioners were greeted by a huge glass font filled with water. It is an echo of the medieval tradition of placing fonts at the entrances of church naves to remind people as they entered that they were baptised.

Water’s use in Scripture and in the world is never far from sacramental. Water gives life. When there is no rain, the land is dry, the crops die, and people are made hungry. How many days can anyone live without water?

Water is not a straightforward image for life. Too much or too little can be devastating. Water can give life and take away life. It is likely that water will gain even more importance in the years to come. In a recent environmental appeal the Archbishop of Cape Town asked for the developed world to change its lifestyle in order that the water of the world might be shared better. Although 75% of the earth’s surface is covered by water, less than 1% is usable by humans – soon it is feared we will compete for less water. Wars in the past have been fought over land and oil; in the future it may well be water.
In the Book of Ezekiel the water of life flows from the Temple down throughout the land, and whatever it touches, it refreshes and brings to life. It is a powerful image. Many ancient churches across Britain were built near the site of water, either streams and rivers, or ancient wells. Perhaps a nod towards pre-Christian times when water was seen as sacred. It is no surprise that the Christian faith tradition sees water as sacred too. Water, from the Holy Place, brings life. The message of God, when shared from Holy Places, brings life.

There is no record of Jesus baptising anyone during His ministry, but the gospels attest to the fact that Jesus was baptised by John. In January this year I visited the River Jordan. On one side, the Israel-Palestine side, the site is still covered in land mines, left there from the 1967 war. Only in March of this year has the Halo Trust begun the difficult process of demining, with backing from Israeli and Palestinian authorities, as well as Christian Churches.

On the Jordanian side of the river, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has already completed the work and the baptismal site is a place of pilgrimage. Careful excavation has uncovered 2nd, 3rd and 4th century churches. You can touch the stones of the buildings; you can walk down into the ancient baptisteries where the Jordan was once channelled. The place resonates with holiness; it is one of God’s special places where water, the cleanser, the life-giver, is all around. It flows over the earth, but you can hear it in the air as you walk.

It is by water, the Sea of Tiberias, or Galilee, that one of the resurrection appearances occurs. The River Jordan flows through that sea. It brings life, new life, and it is no surprise that Jesus, the water of life, appears there to His followers.

In baptism the symbolism of water is not simply about cleansing, it is about inclusion. Martin Luther, feeling discouraged on one occasion, reminded himself: “I am baptised, and through my baptism God, Who cannot lie, has bound Himself in covenant with me.” Through the living water the followers of Jesus encountered their life-giving Lord, and there we find new beginning.

Water is a powerful word of life. Water in baptism is a powerful symbol of God’s Spirit washing over us, reminding us of God’s love and God’s new beginnings. Christianity will flourish in the 21st if we grasp that the Church is above all the community of the baptised.
Baptism may seem like an unremarkable event, in essence in most Christian traditions it is the splash of a little water, and the uttering of a few words. But it is the wet symbol of God’s grace and welcome. If water is a word of life, might it be that we are to live as God’s wet Christians, drenched in God’s grace and love, and not as desiccated fossils drained of human kindness and joy and welcome and wonder?

The water of life.
The water of resurrection.

In our dry and arid world, shrivelled by suspicion and bigotry far too often; a world that we are told harbours a hostile environment to many different people because of their race, their creed, their gender, their sexuality, their class, their economic value, what might the water of life achieve? What might the water of resurrection transform where it touches?

Ezekiel tells us of stagnant waters becoming fresh. Ezekiel tells us of an abundance of food to eat, and the leaves of the trees will be for healing. Jesus, by the waterside, invites His disciples to share food with Him after their hard labour, and then prepares them, after breakfast, to go back out into the world to commence a ministry of witness and compassion.

The water of life.
The water of resurrection.

A splash of words that refresh and cleanse, and make us ready for work. The phrase, ‘splash of words’ comes from the Louis McNeice poem, “Entirely”. ‘Splash of words’ is a good description of faith. When the words of faith splash into your life, the words disturb your surface and have an impact. Ripples of meaning head out towards your shore, and lap against the consciousness of your soul. These words shift your perceptions, slowly but relentlessly, like water drip, drip, dripping on the impervious areas of life. Your life, like a hillside, is carved, and shaped, and formed by the water of faith until you yourself are re-formed.

Like water, faith goes stagnant if it does not move.

On this day, this Holy Day, may the water of life, the water of resurrection, flow around you and over you, beneath you and above you; that you, feeling its touch, may live.

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1 Martin Luther, 'The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism', Luther’s Works vol 35
2 Radcliffe, p1
3 paraphrased from Mark Oakley, The Splash of Words, pxv