

Column

When I was growing up, my family had a parcel of land in the country. Apparently, it was an old homesite because there was a dug, concrete-lined cistern on the property. As you approached it, it looked like a well, but, as it was explained to me early on, in fact it was a place where rain water was stored. The only water in that hole was that which had been placed there.

If you think about it, there are also cisterns of the soul. There is one in each of us. I am thinking of places where we store memories, stories and words. The benefit is that in times of spiritual, emotional or physical need we have resources from which to draw and to quench our thirst.

I am reminded of the story of Terry Waite. Waite was the Assistant for Anglican Communion Affairs for the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, in the 1980s. As an envoy for the Church of England, he travelled to Lebanon to try to secure the release of four hostages. He himself was kidnapped and held captive from 1987 to 1991.

After his release, Waite described his experience in solitary confinement and spoke of drawing out from just such a cistern as I have been describing. He said that each morning he would, from memory, go through the words of the Holy Communion service and other sacred texts. From them, he was able to stay connected to God and reality.

In an interview given in 2017 and printed in the Church Times, he said: “Unconsciously, those words, the words of the Prayer Book and the Psalms and the Bible, stuck in my mind. I can’t remember a single sermon from my childhood, but I could and still can remember those words. In captivity, I had a store of language.”

Nor had this cistern of the soul run dry in the years that followed his release. He went on to say: “Just last night I was with someone who is ill, an old man, aged 93, who is dying, and we said the collect together, ‘Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord. . .’” This prayer, found in the evening service of the Book of Common Prayer, continues: “by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night.”

We all have a cistern in our soul. The question is: what am I putting into it? It was very sad to look into that cistern of my youth. Instead of pure, life-giving water, there was garbage. Surely, that is the way it is with many people. Instead of filling their cistern with pure water, with what is true, lovely and of good report, they fill it with the sewage that comes from today's media, the trivial and trashy.

What resources will these have at their disposal when faced with heartache, tragedy or – God forbid – solitary confinement? Sadly, many will find their cistern either dry or filled with trash. What about you?

The psalmist gives sound advice in this matter and the way forward when he writes: “Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee” (119:11). Let us hear and heed his words while we have the opportunity.

O LORD, we beseech thee favourably to hear the prayers of thy people; that we, who are justly punished for our offences, may be mercifully delivered by thy goodness, for the glory of thy

Name; through Jesus Christ our Saviour, who liveth and, reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost ever, one God, world without end. Amen. (Collect for Septuagesima, Book of Common Prayer)

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