

Season of Creation 3 - Living water that brings life and healing

17 September 2023

PRE_SERVICE CONTEMPLATION

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INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Water is essential for life.

When there's not enough water we call it a ... drought.

When there's too much water we call it a ... flood.

Both of these extremes cause problems, not just to we humans but also to fish who live in our rivers and creeks and the animals and birds that rely on water and also plants.

There are places in Australia that seem dead and desert like much of the time but when rain or floods come this desert springs to life.

Our Bible readings today talk about another sort of river that brings life, the river of God that brings life wherever it flows.

BIBLE READINGS

Listen now for God's Word to God's people

Our ears and hearts are open

[Ezekiel 47:1-12](#)

The man brought me back to the entrance to the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple towards the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar. ... As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off about 500 metres and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. He measured off another 500 metres and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another 500 metres and led me through water that was up to the waist. He measured off another 500 metres, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in – a river that no one could cross. He asked me, 'Son of man, do you see this?'

Then he led me back to the bank of the river. When I arrived there, I saw a great

number of trees on each side of the river. He said to me, 'This water flows towards the eastern region and goes down into the Jordan River valley where it enters the Dead Sea. When it empties into the sea, the salty water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live. Fishermen will stand along the shore; there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds ... Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.'

[Revelation 22:1-5](#)

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light.

For the Word of God in Scripture,
for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

MESSAGE [Water that brings life and healing](#)

The early chapters of Genesis paint a splendid picture of creation as **God intended**. Out of chaos and emptiness, God speaks and life in all its diversity and beauty is created. Rather than being the result of random chance, creation is presented as the product of **God's choice** and **God's love**.



God announces that creation is **good**. It is a **gift** to be received.

Humanity is not the only part of creation that God cares about – as several psalms affirm – but humanity is given a special role as **steward** or overseer of creation.

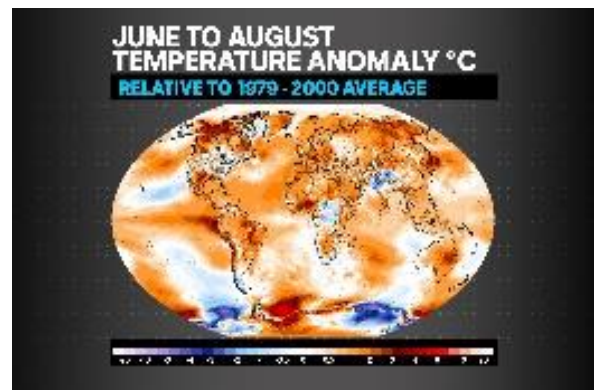
This view of creation is similar to that held by many **Indigenous peoples**, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of our country, where there is a close connection between the people, the Creator, the land, the waters and various creatures who live in these spaces.

This understanding is very different, however, to the view held by the powerbrokers in our human-centric and market driven culture, where the land and the oceans are seen as **resources** to be **used** and **exploited** to produce **things** for people to **buy** – whether food, houses, clothing, cars or electronic devices.



Short term thinking and **making a profit** are key drivers of this sort of economy and we are encouraged to **consume** – and **throw away** – more and more stuff each year to sustain the whole edifice – which is what **GDP** measures – how much **more** we've produced and purchased compared to last year.

This pressure to keep growing the economy every year is **unsustainable**, because of the damage it is doing to the long term health of the environment and the planet as a whole. Yet we keep burning fossil fuels at huge rates and chopping down forests. **The world as a whole passed 1.5 degrees of warming in July and**



August, which was the long-term target of the 2015 Paris climate agreement. **Oops** doesn't cut it!

It's why we have **wars**, as countries or tribes battle for control of resources.

It's why we have a **housing crisis**, a **cost-of-living crisis** and a **climate crisis**.

Most of the time we're oblivious to all of this because it's the only economic system we've known and we live in it 24/7.

But the Bible suggests that there is so much more to life than the economy or being a consumer. We were created for **relationship** – with God, with our neighbour and with the earth and its many creatures.

The Bible warns us against the dangers of **wealth** and **power** and **greed**, suggesting that the pursuit of these things will ultimately result in death, not just physical death but also spiritual death, cut off from the life and love of God.



By contrast, today's two readings speak about the **river of life** that brings life wherever it flows, even to dead and barren places like the Dead Sea. The river will support abundant sea creatures, providing **fish** for fishermen on its shores.

Trees will grow along its banks providing fruit for **eating**.

Their leaves will be for **healing**.

Both readings are a vision of an alternative way of viewing the world.

In each case, the river of life is closely associated with the **presence of God**. In the Ezekiel reading, the water flows from the Jerusalem temple, the dwelling place of God. In Revelation, the river flows from the throne of God. If we think back to the reading from John's Gospel from last week, it's not too much of a stretch to think of the river of life being the Spirit of God at work in the world, bringing life and blessing, healing and hope.

Just as in Israel, Australia is often a very dry place and so fresh water and rivers are highly valued – except of course when there is too much water and destructive floods occur.

Way before there were Europeans in Australia, the rivers and creeks were vitally important for Indigenous people – providing water to drink, a place for washing and cleaning, a source of food and goods to trade (native fish, smoked eels, molluscs), as well as a meeting places for cultural ceremony and education.



The fish traps at Brewarrina in northern NSW and the eel traps at Lake Condah in western Victoria demonstrate how important some of these rivers were to Indigenous people.

So it's not surprising, then, that conflicts between the European colonisers and the Aboriginal peoples revolved around use of the **rivers** as well as about use of the **land**.

The settlers wanted water for their stock.

Indigenous people wanted access to water for drinking and to catch food.

Rather than sharing this precious resource, there was conflict.

There were various competing values at play – the economic demands of pastoralists and later crop farmers, the close connection between water and culture for Indigenous people and the health of the rivers for many other creatures including birds, reptiles and insects.



This year's theme for Season of creation is *Let justice and peace flow*. Its symbol is a river.

So it's time to explore another river – this time the Murray–Darling system of inter-connected rivers. What do **justice** and **peace** look like for this river system and are they flowing?



The short answer is **barely**. Many parts of this vital river system are on life support. Rather than peace there are conflicts aplenty when it comes to the Murray–Darling. How to integrate the competing demands of various stakeholders into some sort of whole seems well nigh impossible.



Farmers and irrigators want to extract the maximum amount of water they can from these rivers to grow crops including fruit, cotton, rice, almonds and dairy. Some of these crops need a LOT of water, especially cotton and rice. Historically, farmers have been given **water rights** to extract

certain volumes from the rivers for irrigation. Other farms have built dams and levees to catch as much water runoff as possible, especially during floods. These water rights add up to more than the total water available in most years.

Then there are **towns** that rely on the rivers for their drinking water. When the rivers run dry, water has to be trucked in from elsewhere.

Scientists argue that the rivers themselves need much higher flows to maintain a viable and healthy eco-system. When this doesn't happen – say due to periods of low rainfall – there are mass fish kills. But then when the rivers flood, washing debris and fertiliser into the rivers, this feeds algal blooms that deplete oxygen in the water, which also leads to mass fish deaths as happened earlier this year.

My brother-in-law Martin is a native fish expert and has worked on this river system for decades, designing fish ladders that enable native fish to migrate upstream, past weirs, so they can breed. He contends that it's not just about the **volume** of water flowing in the rivers that matters, but the **timing**. In times of low rainfall, no water should be allowed for irrigation if native fish are to survive and breed.

Indigenous water rights barely get a look in and were totally ignored when historical water rights were granted to farmers. So although we may say that Aboriginal groups are the long term custodians of these waters, their needs and rights are basically ignored.

All of these issues are overlain by **politics** at the Federal, State and Local level. The Murray-Darling Basin Plan established in 2012 has recently been extended by 3 years as a key element – environmental flows – have not met minimum requirements in many locations.

Overall it seems a bit of a mess. Economics and politics certainly seem to win out over justice for Indigenous groups, and the needs of the many creatures that live along these rivers seem to be easily ignored.

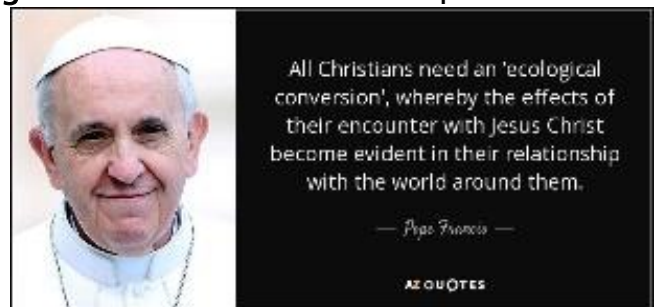
What would it look like for God's river of life to flow down through these rivers and communities to bring fresh life and healing?

What changes and compromises would need to be made?

While it's hard to see a path towards a peaceful and just outcome for all the parties involved, we know God can bring new life even in the midst of death and struggle.

This new life has a **spiritual dimension** as well as a physical dimension. Pope Francis challenges us that we need an '**ecological conversion**' – to take up our vocation as **stewards** of creation seriously and to live out our discipleship – our following the way of Jesus – in how we relate to world and the creatures around us.

It is we who need to change.



Over on the other side of Australia lies **Ningaloo Reef** and **Exmouth Gulf**, home to whale sharks, manta rays, a thriving coral reef and a nursery for humpback whales. Author Tim Winton – known for books like *Cloudstreet*, *Dirt Music* and *Breath* – narrated a brilliant 3 part TV series on ABC on Ningaloo Reef earlier this year. If you haven't seen these programs, look them out on ABC iView as they are quite inspiring.



Unlike the Murray–Darling mess, Ningaloo Reef is protected as a world Heritage protected area and so the eco-system is largely intact.

It's a place of stunning beauty and life and peace.

But here too there are threats from gas producers and from climate change. Winton challenges us to make better choices that put life first.

Let's finish by listening to some final words of wisdom from Tim Winton [from part 3 of the TV series].