

## THE WATER OF LIFE

Today is the Second Sunday in the Season of Creation, which this year has the theme of Living Water. The Season is of course still part of that half of the church's year where we reflect on how to grow towards the full life we are offered as children of God.

When I started to reflect on today's set of readings, I was particularly struck by the two themes present in the texts. Firstly, Ezekiel's glorious vision of the coming kingdom of God and the New Creation that results. The second theme in the New Testament readings of the essential role of forgiveness and enabling relationships in the Christian journey. These themes came to me immediately as an Australian in the context of the issues of the place of water in our often dry and dusty land. I thought to use the Murray Darling system as a parable of the challenges we face in our personal and national lives if we are to live the full Gospel in our land.

Let us start with Ezekiel. He has been taken, in the previous chapters to our reading, by a guide on a visionary journey through the new Jerusalem, especially through the temple with God at the centre. In the opening two verses of today's reading, he moves out of the temple and sees that water is flowing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east. So, this was to be understood as the water of life flowing from the heart of God into a wider world. He is then taken out of the city and around to where the water flows out from under the city wall, and he describes the effect of this living water on creation.

The first thing he notes is that there are a great many trees growing on each bank. This really struck me as it relates to our Australian environment. The zone along the banks of a stream or river is called the riparian zone. It is an essential part of such ecosystems; it slows the flow of water into the waterway, so reducing flooding; it reduces the risk of bank erosion and the muddying of the water; it shades the

banks, so protecting fish and their habitats; logs falling into the water from the riparian zone provide habitats for many fish and other species. These ecological services however have been damaged by the need to provide places for stock to come to water, to provide the wood needed by the steam engines of the riverboats that in the past traded up and down the rivers, by the construction of weirs and dams that evened out water flow thereby stopping flooding from providing the conditions for new trees, like river red gum seedlings, to sprout. The removal of fallen timber, snags, and channel deepening have destroyed much fish habitat. Governments often have programs to restore these systems, for example check the ACT website regarding programs of riparian restoration [here](#).

Ezekiel then goes on to say that in the river of life, every kind of creature swarms, and there are many fish. The water will be fresh, and so lifegiving. Everything will thrive wherever this lifegiving river goes.

His vision then widens and he describes how on both sides for the river there will grow all kinds of trees for food. He says *'Their leaves will not wither nor the fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month; because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing'*.

So it is in our own land, isn't it? The water supports stock, irrigation allows rice, cotton and horticulture in places that would otherwise support only sparse grazing. Think for instance of the use of irrigation water from the Darling to grow fruit trees in far western NSW. Also, the building of large numbers of shallow farm dams, including the huge ones filled from the Darling to support the cotton industry in Queensland. This is water that otherwise would be refilling the Darling and Murray, so maintaining the surrounding natural systems. This leads to environmental stress.

To these challenges, as Christians, we must add the challenge placed before us in Genesis 2:15 *'The Lord God took the human creature and placed him in the Garden to protect and look after it'* that is, to be good stewards of God's creation, both the natural environment and the people that inhabit it.

In Ezekiel, the water and land and people in the new creation are in harmony, but this isn't the case in our world. Unlike the water of life in the New Creation, water here is not in abundance and different people can see different ways it could be used.

Perhaps now is a good time to turn to the New Testament lessons to see what we can find as we work toward a deeper, Christian, response. Paul is discussing situations where people honestly differ in what is right. Most meat offered for sale came as a byproduct of sacrifices in pagan temples. It was, really, almost impossible to be sure where it had come from and so they chose not to eat any of it. Others believed that all food was part of God's creation and wholesome. Sacrificing animals to false Gods could not affect this nature. The fundamental point, he clearly says, is that our primary concern should be to care for one another. Even if we believe we are following the best path we should go out of our way to ensure we do not place a stumbling block in their way by our behaviour. We are to enable people, not inhibit their capacity to grow and serve. We are to understand and so stand with them even as we differ.

How does this affect a Christian response to the water situation in Australia? In our parable of the Murray-Darling basin we find that one group wants to see the recovery of the ecology of the basin system before it is irrevocably damaged, and many species placed at risk. A second group wants to use as much of the water as possible to run their enterprises, thereby extending the production of the natural food and fibre needed by people in many countries around the world. A third group see the restrictions on water to family farms as ultimately financially ruining them, thereby also destroying the

structure of local communities, and leading to the demise of many small local towns and villages.

How do we balance our responsibilities as stewards before God for the welfare of creation against our responsibility to love our neighbours as ourselves? Is doing nothing an option? No.

The issue is made more difficult because not all conservationists are entirely honest or willing to care for others, not all agribusinesses are in business for the good of humanity and not all farming communities are willing to face changes to their traditional patterns in any way that would meet the needs of a changing world.

Is it possible for us to stand alongside each group and feel *with* them rather than *about* them? I repeat, *with* them rather than *about* them? How should we feel towards those we feel are in the wrong or even just have a different perspective? How do we stand with them?

Margaret addressed this very issue last week, didn't she? It is not a matter of not doing anything or not following the course that seems best in the circumstances, but as Christians we have a deeper responsibility to go beyond the moment, to listen to, to care for, those who are struggling or honestly have a different perspective. There is no option that meets all the needs clearly seen in the Murray-Darling Basin. As a nation we must choose a course and then as Christians stand in care with those facing the consequences. This is true in our parable of the Murray-Darling and in all dimensions of our personal and corporate lives. As Margaret described, we must stand on the deeper truths of our joint lives together as members of the Body of Christ and this moves our relationships far beyond that of the immediate issue. In our differences we have the opportunity to deepen our experience of the reality of who we are together. We may even find new dimensions to the reality of being members of the body of Christ!

A few weeks ago, we heard Jesus saying that we are to take up our cross and follow him. I have always found this a difficult challenge to understand. As I was reflecting on the material for this morning, it struck me that this determination to stand with someone as they struggle and from whom we may differ, and to feel their pain or anger or whatever and accept it as part of our relationship with them is truly a load of caring that Jesus carried to the cross and, as we care, so we join his work of reconciliation. Perhaps our cross, like his, can be the pain of standing with those struggling; just as he did and does.

Perhaps we should see what Jesus has to say in response to Peter's question of forgiveness. He is pretty clear that forgiveness must always be available. He says '*Not seven times ... but seventy-seven times*'. However, in the parable of the unforgiving servant he makes it clear that a change of heart is part of the process along with forgiveness. The issue is made even more challenging for those seek to follow him. He says: *So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*

In the Murray-Darling system then we are faced as a community with the fact there is simply not enough water for everything and everyone to do or be what we and they would wish.

I have been speaking about this situation in a wildly oversimplified way, and I am sorry if anyone had hoped I would come up with a perfect solution. There isn't one!

So much then for the parable of the Murray Darling Basin. As always with parables we then need to see how the message applies in our own lives for this is true in every aspect of our lives, isn't it? What is our Christian response when we differ from others when we are confronted with the imperfections of life in this world? However we may stand on the issues, we are called as Christians to stand with all

of those faced by the dilemmas of life in this world. How do we respond? Do we stand alongside each person for whom we have concerns, with those whom we find differ from us? Do we feel with each of them rather than about them? Do we care for them?