**INTO THE WATER 9 January 2022 St Georges Uniting Church, Eden**

The theme of today’s service of worship is ***Into the water***. What does this suggest to you? For me, baptism immediately springs to mind, and this is evident in today’s New Testament Lectionary readings which are all about baptism: first Jesus, then believers. Initially I thought I might focus on baptism, but then realised that the readings also point towards new beginnings: Jesus at the start of his ministry, and the believers who formed the early church.

So today I’ll pursue this, going beyond baptism by building on a couple of the themes that Michael talked about last week: God being the God of community and the God of this enormous universe in which we live, move and have our being; and God being present in both the joys and pains of life.

To do this I invite you to think about how the early church, influenced by its Jewish origins, had understood the symbolism of water. As a starting point, I note that the name *Yah*,as in *Yahweh*, has a close connection with the Mesopotamian God ‘Ea’, the God of Water. Many theologians, too, have observed the links between the Jewish faith, a rural/agrarian society and the desert: water was an essential part of life.

For me, then, it is reasonable that the Jewish faith would have used water as a helpful symbol for exploring and understanding the nature of God; we find this in both the Old and New Testaments. To illustrate this, what biblical stories involve water, healing and new beginnings. Any suggestions? Here are a few:

* In the Creation story, the Spirit of God hovered over the water
* The Flood
* Rebecca drawing water for Isaac at a well
* The parting of the Red Sea
* Water from the rock at Horeb
* The crossing of the Jordan
* The army commander, Naaman, cleansed of leprosy after washing in the Jordan
* The Samaritan woman at the well
* The river of the water of life in Revelations

The reference to water in Luke’s gospel would have been see through the lens of the early church’s understanding of biblical passages such as these. Providing further insights are today’s Old Testament Lectionary readings. Let’s listen to them:

**Isaiah 43:1-7**

**Psalm 29**

Like Luke’s use of symbols – the heavens, a dove and God’s voice – the Isaiah passage also uses symbolism – water, river, fire, flames, ends of the earth. It forms part of ‘second Isaiah’, written during the exile in Babylon, a time of despair and disgrace for the Israelites. Its opening message, however, is full of hope:

*Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.*

Isaiah 43 thus closely links water with a time of re-creation and deliverance.

So, too, does Psalm 29 which notes that:

*The voice of the Lord is over the waters, the God of glory thunders, the Lord thunders over the mighty waters*

and goes on to encompass the whole of creation:

*The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars … He makes Lebanon skip like a calf … the voice of the Lord strikes with flashes of lightning … shakes the desert … the Lord sits enthroned over the floods*

and finishes with a wonderful message of hope:

*The Lord gives strength to the people, the Lord blesses his people with peace.*

A timely message, perhaps, as we struggle to find a faith way through the Covid and climate change crises that face us in 2022. I, for one, want “new beginnings” to help me on this faith journey. In this regard I find it helpful to explore the faith links between water and the whole of creation.

Rabbi Lawrence Troster, a former Scholar-in-Residence with the international Greenfaith organisation, of which the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (ARRCC) is a member, has said:

*Water remains a sine-qua-non of civilisation*. *Try living even one day without it. The ancient Israelites understood water’s value … Unlike Egypt and Mesopotamia, there are no major river systems in the land of Israel, making it almost completely dependent on rain for drinking water and agriculture.*

He then identified water-related themes appearing throughout traditional Jewish texts:

* *Blessing Covenant, and Final Promise*

In Jewish theology, abundant rain is an expression of divine blessing and approval, a means of measuring Israel’s commitment to the covenant. And when the resurrection of the dead became a common Jewish belief, dew and rain became a symbol of that resurrection.

* *Life-Source and Creation*

The primordial deep is the basic resource out of which all Creation emerges. In Psalm 104, for example, the primordial water is brought under God’s control: he transforms chaotic waters into peaceful conduits that water the land to support plants, animal and human life.

* *Wash Me, Clean Me*

Water is seen as wiping impurities away, letting the person be recreated or reborn.

* *Metaphor for Divinity*

In the Hebrew Bible, water, wells, dew, rain, cisterns and fountains serve as metaphors for the divine. Further, Proverbs 18:4 uses “fountain of life” as a metaphor for Wisdom and, in Amos, justice is referred to as water.

In other words, by the time Luke wrote, water already had strong symbolic meaning within the Jewish faith, and he uses this within a Christian framework.

This is also true for us today. I’ll illustrate this through a personal example. Back in 2004, over 17 years ago when my first wife Judith and I came to Eden, we took town water for granted. But in that first year, when we as a church committed to the Garden of Eden Community Project, I realised how vital water would be for that project. I remember paying particular attention, perhaps for the first time, to rainfall. Whereas growing up in England when it rained I would pull a long face and think:

*Oh dear, it’s raining*,

 now I found myself smiling and saying:

*Great! It’s raining*!

This new insight into the symbolism of water within a faith context was one catalyst in my venturing into eco-theology which, 13 years later, saw me self-publish my book *Reimagining Land in Australia*, based on my recently completed PhD on faith aspects of Coal Seam Gas mining in Australia. At the time I was also coming to terms with Judith’s death from breast cancer 6 months previously, so was experiencing a despair that helped me to understand better the context which the oracle of hope in Isaiah 43 addressed: how to find hope even in the darkest of times.

Coming to Eden, getting involved in the Garden project, embarking on eco-theological study, and experiencing the death of Judith together were like an epiphany for me. They deepened my faith journey by giving me a wider appreciation of God’s plan of salvation, that encompasses all of Creation as well as humanity. They also helped me embrace mystery, ambiguity and paradox as a part of understanding and accepting joy and pain, delight and loss, and uncertainty and hope on that faith journey … just as the Israelites learned about re-creation and the loving nature of God while still in the despair of their degrading captivity in Babylon.

This is what the early church found, too, when coming to terms with the challenges of an oppressive Roman occupation, a hostile religious establishment, and the threat of persecution. They would have had many questions about Jesus’ challenging teachings on faith. Yet at this very time of great uncertainty and change they embraced baptism, a practice that had at its core the symbolism of water.

So now, in response to the challenges of Covid and climate change, a time of great uncertainty and change, I use the symbolism of water as an inspiration for stepping out in faith, as a call to seeing God’s economy of salvation within the broad context of the renewal of all of God’s creation.

Yes, the Covid crisis is a consequence of human behaviour, as is the climate crisis. But we need to understand them through the baptismal stories, to hear loud and clear the divine call to dive into the water, to repent and change our behaviour as an outworking of our commitment to a life of faith, to serving God’s Creation as commissioned in Genesis 2:15. And part of that behavioural change is to give greater priority to the world around us, not just to our own salvation.

Two weeks ago Janice led the service here. And in that service she read a *Discipleship Thought* based on Psalm 148, a psalm of praise, a hymn to the unity of all things. I’ll read it again because it is so relevant to today’s service:

*All people, young and old, men and women, all non-human creatures, all elements of the earth and its weather – all are called upon to praise God. What would it mean for us, for our faith communities, to take seriously the unity of all elements of the universe? What would it mean for us to live as if our neighbour, birds and animals, trees, mountains sea creatures, and even our weather were precious to each of us and to God? What would it mean for us to see the nature and energy of God in each of them? How could it change our worship together?*

My simple prayer today, then, is based on this *Discipleship Thought*:

*God of new birth, God of the gift of love, God of the whole of creation, today we celebrate your breaking into the world through the life of Jesus. We celebrate you surprising a weary world with peace and joy.* ***AMEN***

***Into the Water*** encourages me to think of renewal, for wholeheartedly embracing a faith journey that includes interconnecting with, and loving, the world around us. I see this as an integral part of our vision for a New Heaven and a New Earth. To use Pat’s terminology, we are an integral part of Club Earth and we are encouraged by today’s readings to be team members, working together for the renewal of God’s Earth.

**AMEN**

[For those of you who enjoy poetry, there follows an update of a poem I wrote two months ago when reflecting on the challenges of climate change and Covid-19. The virus it refers to could be my consumption of resources that contributes to climate change or my lack of responsible Covid-19 behaviour. It is a Pantoum, a poem where each line is repeated once following a prescribed structure. Enjoy!]

**RENEWAL**

It’s here I find Shalom at last:

beside still waters running deep.

This virus tears my soul apart:

am I to blame for causing pain?

Beside still waters running deep

I want to wash away this stain.

Am I to blame for causing pain

if others catch my selfish greed?

I want to wash away this stain,

not good for me nor anyone

if others catch my selfish greed:

it spreads so fast – what can I do?

Not good for me nor anyone,

it messes up our lives too much.

It spreads so fast - what can I do:

monastic living; isolate?

It messes up our lives too much,

infecting those I love so dear.

Monastic living, isolate?

Our God suggests a selfless path.

Infecting those I love so dear

consuming guilt controls my life.

Our God suggests a selfless path:

“*Replace your greed with loving grace*”.

Consuming guilt controls my life,

this virus tears my soul apart.

“*Replace your greed with loving grace*”:

it’s here I find Shalom at last.

9 January 2022