Water Is Life, Sanitation Is Dignity

Thabo Makgoba*

We learned recently in Cape Town that as a result of diminished rainfall over the past year, the dams supplying water for our metropolitan area are only 29 percent full; we cannot expect our winter rains to begin before May 2018. While I won’t go into the linkages between the El Niño phenomenon and global warming here, our water crisis had the effect of concentrating my mind on how precious water is and on how devastating the effects of scarcity can be.

But apart from that, why would an archbishop be talking about water? Well, to begin with, water is mentioned 722 times in the Bible. It literally frames the biblical story. The first book, Genesis, starts with a wonderful poetic image of water and creation.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. (Gen. 1:1–2)

Before creation even took place, the waters were there. Water is a primal element giving birth to life. It is no wonder that when a child is born, the waters break to symbolize the start of the journey—a new life coming into the world. And in the last book of the Bible, Revelation, we have a wonderful vision of re-creation. The followers of Jesus are being persecuted, and in the midst of pain and destruction, John the writer encourages them to persevere, within this vision of re-creation.

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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. (Rev. 22:1–3)

What a beautiful vision! Here, at the heart of restored creation, we encounter the river of the water of life, flowing from the throne of God. Water is channeled, sustaining life, not ravaging like a flood. The water is clear and clean. What a vision for our lands, if we work together to clean our rivers and to plant trees for the healing of the nations. Imagine clean rivers and trees soaking up carbon pollution and breathing out life-giving oxygen.

Water is particularly important in scripture because of the lands where the biblical stories take place. They are dry lands, with no great rivers like the countries of Egypt or Mesopotamia. Israel only has one main river, the Jordan; the rest of their water supply is dependent on the rains. The yearning for water as the spring of life is a part of daily life. And so these scriptures resonate with us in sub-Saharan Africa, where rain-fed agriculture accounts for more than 95 percent of farmed land. Without water there is no life.

Water was present at the start of creation, and the entire history of God’s work on Earth is framed by rivers.

**Water in Southern Africa**

We are currently experiencing drought where I live. We have only three months’ supply left. And in South Africa as a whole, the drought impacts us all in many ways—the most obvious being food shortages leading to price increases that affect the poor disproportionately. Many casual workers have lost their jobs. The lack of water is one of the biggest business risks to our country, and with climate change, drought will become more and more common. Recently the following story brought the shortages home as a reality.

The family of a young pupil killed at Hlathelidumayo at KwaNongoma in northern KwaZulu-Natal, apparently over drinking water,

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is battling to come to terms with their loss. Fifteen-year-old Qiniso Mhlongo was stoned by a group of boys and died a day later in hospital. Community members say the altercation started over water. It’s believed boys from another village accused some girls of dirtying the available water. Qiniso was apparently trying to protect the girls from the boys who were harassing them. His mother, who tried to stop the fight, was also injured in the face. Police in the area have since then arrested two people in connection with the murder.³

In another part of the church in Southern Africa, Mozambique, climate change leads to the opposite effect: severe flooding. Floods wash away homes and topsoil, leaving the land degraded and crops destroyed.

Water Justice

The theme for this issue is water justice, and we can see so clearly that the distribution of water is based on inequality. We cannot talk of water without talking of sanitation, and for that reason the title of my article is “Water Is Life, Sanitation Is Dignity.” Many of the threats to water are coming from companies who pollute rivers with industrial waste. We suffer a lot from acid mine drainage affecting our water systems.

The shareholders of mining companies make a profit, but the local communities are left with water degradation. As a church we must stand firmly against fracking, since for the sake of short-term profit there is a danger of water systems being polluted for decades. Large corporate farms are also responsible, as the run-off from artificial fertilizers and pesticides pollutes the rivers. In robust debates with such companies, the mining sector in particular, which we call “courageous conversations,” we are slowly finding each other in service to the community.

South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world. This is seen nowhere as clearly as with the issue of access to water and sanitation. Whereas one family waters their vast lawn and fills their swimming pool, another shares a single tap with twenty neighbors. Whereas one family has four bathrooms, another shares a communal toilet with dozens of people.

Girls going out to use the toilet at night risk being raped and residents are afraid of being robbed; children play in dirty water draining from toilets; polluted water and raw sewerage routinely flow between and through homes, making these communities places of illness and death. Lack of access to clean and safe sanitation routinely emerges as the number one concern for those living in these communities. It has recently been estimated that sixteen million people in South Africa do not have access to basic sanitation facilities (one in three people).4

According to the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical Water Network, almost 750 million people do not have basic access to the lifesaving twenty liters of clean water they need each day, not only because water is scarce, but because the needs and rights of marginalized communities are not given priority.5 Poverty and power relations are reflected and reinforced in who has access to and control over water. I have experienced this myself in the Kingdom of Lesotho, which has vast dams of water for South Africa, yet the country’s own people are suffering severe water restrictions. In Lesotho, you bathe with a basin, yet when you travel to the neighboring city of Bloemfontein, the taps run freely and the water sprinklers are keeping lawns green and the pools full.

What Can We Do?

Remember That Water Is Sacred

We have lost the sense of sacredness of water by seeing it as something that comes out of a tap. How can we reconnect with water as something holy and precious? Christians know the name of the river that Jesus was baptized in—the Jordan River. And yet where did the water come from that was used for your baptism? Where is your River Jordan? Can you identify it and see if it is clean and free from rubbish?

Water is a sacred gift from God and, speaking for Christians, it is not only full-time conservationists who are called to be stewards of God’s creation—it is all of us. So we need to educate ourselves and understand where the water we use comes from. We need to look at how we use it and make sure we use it carefully, turning off dripping taps and checking water meters to make sure there are no leaks. In

4 “Water Is Life, Sanitation Is Dignity.”
the South African summer, we have to water our gardens early in the
morning so as not to waste water through evaporation in the midday
sun. I am proud to see some of our churches now putting in bore-
holes. When one of our churches in Mozambique built a new church
building, they put in a water pump right at the church door to encour-
ge people to come!

Let water inspire us and heal us. Let us keep connected to natural
water source areas and help ensure we have examples left of pristine
habitats to leave as a legacy to our children and children’s children.

Care for Our Oceans and Rivers

Enormous quantities of rubbish end up in rivers and oceans. The
statistics on waste are shocking: by 2050 there will be more plastic in
the oceans per weight than fish.\[^6\]

The best way to care for our oceans and rivers is to be passionate
campaigners against waste. In the Diocese of Harare in Zimbabwe,
each church has adopted a local area where they clean up, such as a
taxi rank or a stretch of street. They talk there of the “4 Rs”: Reduce,
Re-use, Recycle, and Rejoice! Once they have cleaned up, they plant
something beautiful in place of the trash. Last year I was proud of our
Province’s Mothers’ Union, when they banned the use of Styrofoam
cups at church social functions, stopping the use of a material that
breaks down into tiny particles that are now forming endlessly circu-
lating masses in the sea.

Reduce Your Meat

One of the biggest environmental impacts of a meat-eating diet
is the consumption of vast amounts of water for the livestock produc-
tion. Most of it is used to irrigate the grains and hay fed to the ani-
mals. According to the World Wildlife Fund, in South Africa it takes
860 liters of water to produce a five hundred gram\[^7\] steak. This is the
equivalent of thirteen showers. Switching to a plant-based diet or re-
ducing the amount of meat in your diet is one of the most important
choices you can make to help save water.

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\[^6\] Sarah Kaplan, “By 2050, There Will Be More Plastic Than Fish in the
washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/01/20/by-2050-there-will-be-
more-plastic-than-fish-in-the-worlds-oceans-study-says/.

Fight Climate Change

The most important message I can leave you is this: if you want to do something to help the people of Africa, change your lifestyle, influence your politicians, and let us make fighting climate change the highest priority on all of our agendas. Churches, NGOs, businesses: the time has come for us to work together and to fight climate change. Without much more action, the future is bleak, very bleak indeed. We stand at the eleventh hour.

A Challenge to Us All

In the Anglican Communion’s Environmental Network we have learned that to conquer the environmental challenges we face we must learn from indigenous people, and so I would like to end with this prophetic quote attributed to an elder Hopi of Arizona, one of the First Nations of the United States.

You have been telling the people that this is the Eleventh Hour, now you must go and tell the people that this is the Hour. And there are things that need to be considered:

Where are you living? What are you doing? What are your relationships? Are you in right relation? Where is your water? Know your garden. It is time to speak your Truth. Create your community. Be good to each other. And do not look outside yourself for the leader.

Then he clasped his hands together, smiled, and said, This could be a good time! There is a river flowing now very fast. It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid. They will try to hold on to the shore. They will feel they are torn apart and will suffer greatly.

Know the river has its destination. The elders say we must let go of the shore, push off into the middle of the river, keep our eyes open, and our heads above water. And I say, see who is in there with you and celebrate. At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally, least of all ourselves. For the moment that we do, our spiritual growth and journey comes to a halt.

The time for the lone wolf is over. Gather yourselves! All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.

We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.

God bless you.
A River Runs through It

HEATHER PATACCA*

As is often the case with forays into new areas of ministry or opportunities for engagement with our local community and beyond, knowledge of what will actually be involved, the required resources, the gifts and skill sets needed, only become fully apparent once you are on the journey and the commitment to go forward has been made. In Luke 14, Jesus tells two parables about weighing up becoming his disciple: a builder must estimate the cost before commencing to build a tower, and a king going into battle carefully assesses whether he can win with his forces or if terms need be negotiated. The “weigh it up before you begin” principle Jesus describes in relation to deciding to follow him continues to apply through our Christian life. We consider how best to be involved in the ministry to which we are called, but with the advantages of prayer for guidance, the discernment of the Spirit’s leading, and the fellowship and gifting of other faithful disciples.

Had I been aware that at the end of the process I would be writing this article, then I suspect I would have approached organizing the Just Water 2017 conference entirely differently, and far more systematically. There would have been pieces of paper with Simon Sinek-style diagrams with concentric circles with a central why, then how, and what radiating out. I might have a table outlining stages of Christian life and growth1 with headings from “Raising Awareness of God,” through “Pre-evangelism, Evangelism, Conversion, Young Christian,” ending with “Trained for Full-Time Ministry,” and appropriate points under each heading as to how the conference contributed, in ministry terms, to our cathedral life and mission. In our cathedral vision statement, included with the notes that describe how we advance our

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1 Borrowed from Peter Bolt, *Mission Minded* (Kingsford, NSW, Australia: Mat-thais Media, 2007).