



# WATER IS SACRED

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**We need to humble ourselves before God and accept that water is sacred. It is a gift from God and must be used to honour God. Wherever water is we must use it to glorify God.**

Environmental issues are more than complicated science. There is plenty of need and space for complex scientific theories and interventions, and I am grateful to all those who use their God given gifts to delve into the deep truths of the complexity of God's creation. But I am a simple practitioner whose work is to encourage other everyday people like me, to rethink life on earth. To use Archbishop Thabo's words – *"water is sacred and is not to be treated as a commodity."* We all engage with our environment in a deeply personal way. There is both a physical and a spiritual connection. Again to use Archbishop Thabo's words *"We need to react appropriately and take our Baptismal water seriously."*

There is a place for protest and there is a place for policy advocacy and there is a place for addressing the complexities of hydrology. Just as there is a place for the thunderstorm and the flood and the drought. We need to do a lot as the Church to address water allocation and water injustice, we need to address the whole water cycle and the whole human water cycle. We cannot just deal with one part of the problem, we have to address it all.

I'd like to take this opportunity to exhort us to move from **Protest to Practice**. We need **Protest**, it inspires, it highlights the problems, it identifies the culprits. But **Practice** recognizes that I am as much part of the solution as the problem. **Practice** brings about immediate results in addressing the issues that we are concerned about and a change in practice will only come about in a change of attitude.

When we look at water, one of the drivers of change is scarcity. But this philosophy continues to view water as a commodity and its value is in terms of supply and demand. We need to move

from a value of scarcity to a value of sacredness. Christians have a leading role to play in shifting our mindsets to see water as being sacred. When our value is based on water's availability, we treasure it when it is scarce and enjoy it and waste it when it is abundant. But when our value is that water sacred, we honour it and treasure it and use it wisely in both drought and flood.

**We need to be transformed by the renewal of our minds and not conform to the ways of the world (Romans 12 :2 paraphrased).** We are called to transform our actions. Protest must lead to Practice and protest must not only call on others to change but must transform us. Our value must be based on sacredness and not scarcity.

There is a place for the everyday experience of clouds and drizzle and mist and soaking gentle rain. There is a place for streams and rivers and oceans and seas. And so, I ask you to, for a moment, as we celebrate **World Water Day**, to take a little journey with me into the simplicity of it all.

**Water is life.** Without it we have nothing. Let's learn to appreciate it for what it is and to recognize it, where it is – in your tap, in your storm water drain, in your kitchen sink and in the great places where you usually recognize it too.

As we celebrate **World Water Day**, it gives us the opportunity to allow for the *"transformation/renewal of our minds."* All too often when we look at the ethic behind environmental issues we have not yet humbled ourselves at the foot of God who created all things and held water in such high regard that his own Son spoke of himself as being *"living water."* We need to make the shift from water as a commodity to be purified and piped and used and recycled, to water being a source of life, a gift from God to be appreciated as a sacred aspect of life.

Water is one of the great teachers in God's creation. Let me begin by challenging you to think about what you understand water to be. When asked what water is, many people give a scientific formula as their answer. *"H<sub>2</sub>O"* is what they say!

**Lesson one** – scientific formulas can never give you a sufficient answer for what God has created and given to us to be stewards over. If water were truly just a combination of available elements – we could make it by simply combining them in the right proportions. Until we sit at the feet of God in humility and awe, we cannot learn from God. Too often our environmental endeavors are just a shift on our demand to dominate and rule, we still treat the environment as a commodity. **Water is not a commodity, it is a sacred gift from God.**

**We need to learn lesson two** – If water is sacred our stewardship of it must change. Water cannot be dominated and controlled. It is sacred and must be revered and worked with. Any and every flood event should be enough to convince us of that. The power of water cannot be stood against. No matter what our understanding of the earth is, we all have to admit that water has shaped our planet and transformed the surface of the earth. We are not in control, we only have the illusion of

control. If we are to truly understand our role on earth, it is to work with God. We can build dams and canals and construct river diversions and harvest the mist and desalinate sea water, but only by God's grace alone, do we have any ability to draw anything from water, to receive its benefits.

**Water is not a commodity to be abused by us and controlled by us, it is sacred and must be revered and appreciated and used to the glory of God.**

**Water is our great teacher. And in the beginning the Spirit hovered over the waters (Genesis 1:1)** and so may the Spirit of God hover over the waters today and bring order out of our chaos. Repeatedly water is used as a symbol of life and death and cleansing and when withheld, as a punishment and when rained on us, a blessing; and yet we have accepted these texts as if they are a pretty comparison and a sterile simile providing a "cute" metaphor.

*Do we respect water as much as the Bible does? Is it as much part of our story as it was for the Bible characters that we learn from?*

There are countless examples of the interactions between humanity and God that took place with water, in water or on water.

Capetonians have a whole new respect for water after their time of scarcity. *What will it take us all to start treating water with respect – to start respecting God for the gift of water?*

I have seen how quickly people forget after floodwaters have ravaged their homes and I see how little action has changed as a result of the consequences – nature is not seen as a teacher, but as something that we can control or ignore or deny the authority that it has over us!

**Water is forgiving.** Throughout our land there are bodies of water that are severely contaminated by all kinds of pollution. What continues to amaze me is how downstream the river recovers and has mechanisms that heal it. I live on one of the shortest rivers in South Africa, and despite its short distance and huge pollution load, by the time the water reaches the sea its water quality has improved. In these last two years we have seen how two successive floods have improved the mechanics of the river and the water quality is better despite no reduction in pollution.

I deeply believe that we need to accept that water is a teacher of the faith. God is preaching to us in every storm water drain, every urban canal, every estuary, every dam, every river, every stream, every ocean and ice cap. *Are we listening? Or are we seeing that the destruction of nature is just a sign of sinfulness?* Drought means that we have sinned and rain means that we are blessed. We've oversimplified the greatest sermon ever preached, and it's the greatest because God has been preaching it since the beginning and will be preaching it till the end. But I'm not sure we are seeing nature for its prophetic value.

*As we celebrate World Water Day – what are the waters saying to us?*

From one simple inhabitant of earth to another, let me state the truth hidden in plain sight. The world is divided into catchments. Every river system has an area in which all the water flows into it. We

call the highest point the watershed – that’s where the water flows in opposite directions (like the apex of a roof). What flows the one way flows into one river and what flows the other flows into another.

Conditions in each of these catchments vary according to many ecological factors but one catchment does not function according to the ecological conditions of another catchment. Everything that happens in a catchment – every building, every land use, every impact on the habitat affects the water in that catchment. The mechanics and the water quality and the entire functioning of the system is dictated to and determined by the conditions in that catchment. The external factors are not the greatest influence on the hydrology of a catchment – the conditions, the geography, the geology, the aspect the land use and all the impacts in that catchment are the primary influences and it is these issues that need to be addressed in that catchment.

We have a lovely expression in environmental circles. “Think globally but act locally.” You don’t try and solve the problem of drought in a rain forest and you don’t build dams in the desert. Despite the severity of floods in one place and the severity of drought in another, you have to deal with life – in your catchment! You have to be focused on your own issues!

Naturally a desert will be a warning to a rainforest (our deserts were once forests). An erosion gully is a warning to a grassy plain! But you need to manage your life where it is and not where it is not. Water runs downhill and once it has gone its gone. You have to deal with it in the context of the catchment you are in and what you do now affects your whole future, water teaches us that.

**Water has multiple functions in a catchment.** Much more than provide liquid for plants and animals to drink, water is a transport agent; dissolving solids and even moving solid particles. Water is the lifeblood of a catchment! “I am the living water” said Jesus and Jesus is more than just being a drink! Water purifies, it brings balance, it changes the landscape. And in each catchment it does what is required there. Water plays the same role in the Karoo and in the mangroves, although it does it very differently. The slightest mist can sustain the fynbos and great deluges don’t destroy the mangroves. But water teaches us that we have to be consistent within our context – 1000mm per annum doesn’t give you the most diverse plant population in the world. The fynbos, needs around 190mm a year. More than 10mm a year won’t give you the uniqueness of a desert and less than a 1000mm won’t give you a Rain Forest.

But you couldn’t just pour 1000mm of rain on the Namib and expect a rainforest to occur – it sounds crazy saying that and yet look at what we do when we think that we are in control. That we can manipulate and get what we want but doing what we think we have control over. In every



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aspect of our lives the principal of nature – the mechanics of the catchment apply. From Highveld Thunderstorms to West Coast ‘fog’ to KZN “mizzel” (a unique heavy mist that saturates the earth without it actually raining). Water works God’s miracles. In different quantities, in different forms: hail, ice, snow and rain. It cleanses the earth and carries our pollution. And nature cleanses it and purifies it and accepts it.

**“I am the living water”** said Jesus. I ask you, could you go to your local stream and say – *Jesus would compare himself to this?*

This World Water Day – let us be students of God’ s great teacher. Let us see water for what it is – the giver of life.

If we cannot change the way we think about water which is so essential for our survival in the physical sense – how can we be honest about changing the way we think of the living water in the spiritual sense.

Today let us say to Jesus:

*“as I accept you as the Living water and respect you as the living water, I will start to respect the physical water which you chose to identify yourself with, I will value it as Sacred. I will see the characteristics that you have revealed in water, as a life lesson for who you are to me and how you work in my life, and I will accept hat as sacred. And I will treat water as a revelation of your love for us. With the respect and honour that it deserves.”*

Let’s move beyond protest to practice. Let us answer the call of God to honour God in all that is scared on the earth.

**“There is a divine wind sweeping over the waters.”** (Gen 1:1 NJB) May it move us to worship. Baptism is in itself an acceptance of the sacred nature of water – let us life our lives today holding onto the sacred nature of water and honoring Christ who is the living water.

**Amen.**

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**Yours in Christ**

**Revd. Andrew Manning**