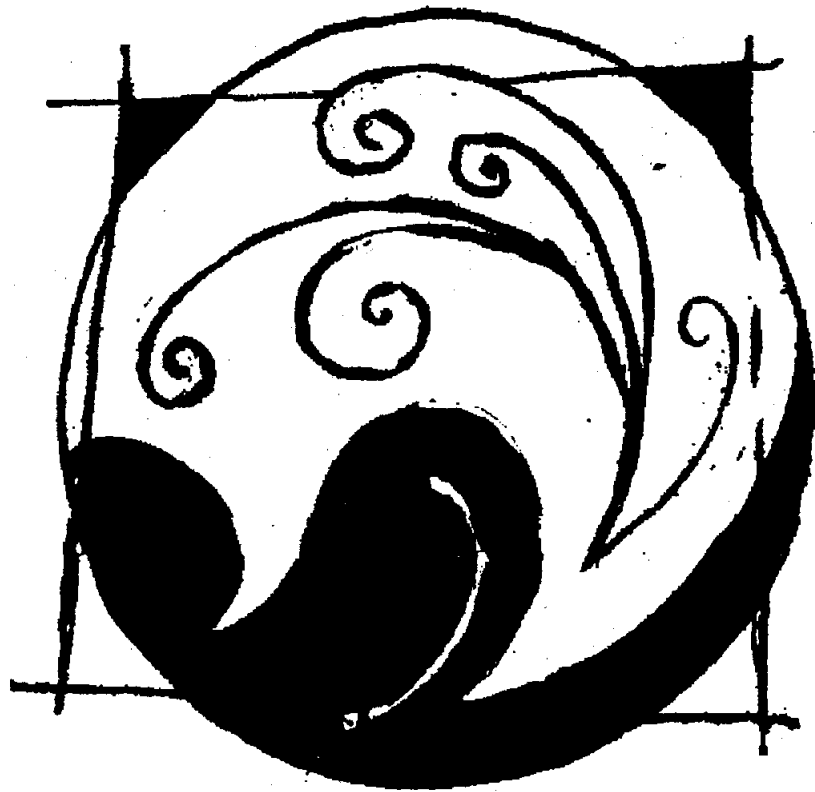


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Water



by Ross Langmead

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"CAUTION: POLLUTION LEVELS MAY BE EXCESSIVE"

What do you think of when water pollution is mentioned? Many people are reminded of the Exxon Valdez oil spill which devastated hundreds of kilometres of North American coast. Others think of the Great Lakes of the US and Canada, which are so acidic and polluted that fish cannot live in most of them. But what about Australia? Are not we lucky to live in a huge clean land, hardly spoiled by human civilisation?

Unfortunately not. Near our large population centres the quality of our rivers, bays and beaches is suffering critically.

The sign reads: "Caution, pollution levels may be excessive. Bathe at your own risk." The beach is Manly, in Sydney. The beaches at Manly and Bondi were famous in the past for their surf and sand. Now they are famous for being so polluted that swimmers are warned to stay away for parts of the year. Sydney's sewage is given little treatment before it pours from ocean outfalls in huge quantities at Malabar, Bondi and North Head.

Victoria is beginning to see similar problems of water pollution in Port Phillip Bay, due not to sewage but to rubbish from storm water drains pouring into the sea near our beaches. It is particularly noticeable after rain, when drains dump their rubbish into the bay. Surfers at Ocean Grove have formed an action group to alert the public to worsening pollution along Victoria's west coast.

The news is not all bad. The Maribyrnong River in Melbourne's western suburbs was for a century or more the gutter for a wide range of heavy industry. The fish died off. The colour was a grey-brown mixture. But as a result of active pollution controls over 15 years it has regained its health. Anglers can be seen along its banks and it looks attractive again.

Around the world, people are realising that water is easily polluted and yet is one of our most precious resources.

Information

Without water there would be no living creature. The amazing power of creation is evident in the way water is used in all living organisms, from bacteria to humans. We humans are about three quarters water.

It appears in a wondrous variety of forms. We see it as ice, water or steam. We find it in lakes, icebergs, rivers, oceans, clouds and humid air. It washes away waste. It transports nutrients. It is the home for aquatic life. It is an excellent solvent. We cook with it, wash with it, drink it, play in it, grow food with it, clean with it and get cool and warm with it. A few moments of thinking about water reminds us of the magnificent pattern of creativity in the universe, bound together in a web of life.

Over the centuries clean water has always been seen as precious. In recent times, however, with the industrial revolution and an increasing population, our impact on the oceans, rivers and bays has increased dramatically. We are realising only now that we are seriously fouling the water we depend on.

There are four main types of water pollutants:

1. Organic wastes.

These include food scraps, detergents and other organic wastes from the home; animal droppings which find their way into the storm water system; and sewage in various stages of treatment. Problems arise when there is too much to break down naturally in time. We get foul smells, fish die, and huge numbers of algae sometimes grow in response to the ecological imbalance. Victorian beaches often yield high E-coli readings, which indicate the presence of human or animal sewage.

2. Toxicants (poisons).

Many factories using heavy metals such as mercury or copper have significant water run-off, and have often let it straight into the water system. Pesticides used on crops often find their way into rivers or drains. They accumulate in the food chain and poison fish. Oil and petroleum products affect marine animals. There are many new industrial chemicals being used and ending up in the aquatic environment without much knowledge of their long term effects.

3. Rubbish.

Our way of life leads to huge amounts of rubbish, particularly plastics, which don't break down for a very long time. Beachgoers often see bags, bottles, ropes, cans, tampons, nappies and so on. Rivers and drains are also clogged with these things. Not only are they unsightly, they are also dangerous to aquatic life. Penguins get snared in plastic six-pack beer wrappings. Turtles eat coloured balloon pieces and choke. Birds get caught in rubbish and starve.

4. Fallout from the atmosphere.

On a more social scale, our oceans suffer from falling pollutants from the atmosphere: noxious fumes from industry, homes and cars; radioactive fallout; and gases such as sulphur dioxide. The oceans of the world are now noticeably affected by this fallout.

Biblical Reflection

Christians are called to live in harmony with God, each other and the earth (which is seen in the bible as a gift from God to be carefully managed). This is the basic stance from which we can respond.

It is worth noting that the first covenant recorded in the bible, contained in the story of Noah following the flood, was made between God and all living things. The whole of living creation was included in God's care. (Genesis 9:8-10).

We have not always followed God's ways, either in human relationships or as stewards of the earth. When Moses was dying he reminded the Israelites of their ungratefulness, in a way which is relevant to our environmental crisis today:

Is this the way you repay the Lord, O foolish and unwise people?
Is this not your creator, who made you and formed
you? (Deuteronomy 32:6)

Interestingly, for our focus on clean water, Moses compares his teaching of God's ways to drops of rain and dew on the earth, to showers on young plants and gentle rain on tender grass. (Deuteronomy 32:2).

The biblical vision for the reign of God is wholistic and expressed in the rich concept of "shalom", which includes rich harmony between people, their God and their environment. It is poetically expressed in Isaiah 43:18-19:

Watch for the new thing that I am going to do.
It is happening already - you can see it now!
I will make a road through the wilderness
and give you streams of water there.

Our response to the serious pollution of our waters can include committing ourselves to being agents of the new reign, helping to enjoy streams of water, both spiritual and material.

Response: What Can We Do?

Governments and industry certainly have a responsibility to act on water pollution. The resurrection of the Maribymong River is a story of hope due to the action of the Environment Protection Agency.

Individuals can make a difference too. Greenpeace sponsors a beach cleaning project where a group of volunteers adopts a stretch of beach and picks up rubbish regularly, noting the quantities of each type, to help us learn what the main sources of ocean rubbish are.

Here are a few things we can do, which will lessen water pollution. Add others of which you are aware. Place these responses in order of priority for yourself as an individual and then collectively for your group.

(1) Take part in community clean-up days, when rubbish is collected by thousands of people at beaches and rivers.

(2) Use natural cleaners in the home, avoiding bleaches and phosphates. See the Australian Conservation Foundation's great little book by Barbara Lord, *The Green Cleaner* (Melbourne: Schwartz and Wilkison, 1989).

(3) Find new ways of disposing oils and chemicals instead of pouring them down drains. Small quantities of motor oil can be absorbed in a corner of the garden. Councils offer ways of disposing of household chemicals.

- (4) Avoid the use of styrofoam cups, which don't break down and are deadly to turtles and fish.
- (5) If you use six-packs of cans, at least cut open the plastic rings and dispose of them properly.
- (6) Recycle car batteries (lead) and use rechargeable household batteries.
- (7) Clean dog droppings from footpaths and nature strips. They are a major cause of high E-coli readings in Port Phillip Bay, because they get washed down storm drains after rain.
- (8) Lobby governments and manufacturers for controls on toxic chemicals and factory waste water
- (9) Avoid using plastic nappies. Dispose of rubbish properly and pick up others' rubbish when convenient.

As in all environmental issues, when it comes to water pollution, what we do makes a real difference. It is everybody's problem, and we as Christians have a positive contribution to make.