

The Fourth Sunday of Creation: River Sunday

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Season of Creation 4A River Sunday – Rev 22 1-5, Mt 28 1-10

...the angel showed me the river of the water of life

Whenever I'm out walking with anyone and our path crosses a river, there's something important we have to do. As we get to the bridge, we each have to find a small wooden stick. Then we go to the upstream side of the bridge, above the middle of the current, lean out as far as we can, and let our sticks drop. Then, for a slow river, we amble across to the downstream side, or for a fast one, we rush over to watch for our sticks to appear again.

Sometimes we treat it all superficially, as if it's just a race; whose stick's going to appear first? But deeper down, we share a hope. We hope the sticks we dropped at the upstream side will actually appear at the downstream side; that the unseen bit of the river will flow freely; that there aren't any hidden snags. Sometimes it can take ages. All sorts of obstacles or eddies you can't see might be lurking under that bridge. But we wait together in hope. Pooh-Sticks trains us in hope.

Another thing Pooh-Sticks teaches us – *and yes, that is the official name of this spiritual exercise in the English-speaking world* – another lesson of Pooh-Sticks is that upstream, our relationship with the river is quite different from what it is when we're downstream. It's as though we become different people. Upstream, once we've dropped our stick, our part of the job is over. We must trust the river to do the rest. All the fun and none of the responsibility – as grandparents sometimes say.

But for downstreamers, there are deeper questions of commitment. When our sticks do come into view, will we still be like the people we were upstream? As the stick appears, do we just smile, and then relieved, turn and walk on our way? Or do we stay to watch them out of sight? If we just turn and walk away, we haven't grown; we're still upstream people. But staying to watch – or even better, taking to the river bank and tracking alongside our sticks – we commit ourselves to the down-stream adventure the river calls from us; we commit to a relationship with the river.

We South Australians know well what it means to be downstream people. We're conscious of *our* vulnerability. But perhaps we're not always conscious of the miraculous, intricate web of life that's also sustained by our river system, which in *its* turn looks after the health of the rivers themselves. This land is like a living body and the rivers are like its bloodstream. I read recently how the 30,000 Murray Darling Basin (MDB) wetlands don't just sustain the land's unique plant and wildlife. They're like the rivers' kidneys. They absorb nutrients, filter out pollutants and regulate flow so that they manage the rivers' 'flood-pressure'.

We know this is all in grave danger – particularly if the MDB plan is completely mutilated by the politics of greed. Over 80% of the waterbirds we had in 1987 have disappeared. And that seemingly limitless supply of red-gum firewood trucked in from NSW each winter; it's a frightening local image of the holocaust in the MDB.

So while we hope and trust that those upstream will give *us* some thought, we must also remember the web of life which the rivers are less and less able to sustain. Are we *and* the upstreamers willing to be stewards of all this, or are we just another of the introduced pests; self-appointed top predators in a food-chain which we allow to serve only our own interests? What we throw in or take out of the river is a matter of life and death for a vast area of this land and all

its ecosystems. Will our legacy be that of life-restoring custodians of the rivers, or the ones who finally killed them?

In Rev 22.1, we heard these words; *the angel showed me the river of the water of life*. These words echo the story we read three weeks ago in Gen 2 about a stream rising from the Earth – a river flowing out from Eden *to water the garden*. At the centre of that garden grew the tree of life. The river flowed out and branched into four rivers which brought life to the known Earth. But then we read how the humans behaved like upstream people. We did what we *felt* like doing, and the world downstream was cursed to weather the consequences of our selfishness.

Today, hearing the final chapter of the book of Revelation, by the Grace of God, we're given a call to recommit to being downstream people. And the stream is again the River of the Water of Life. This time, it flows towards us from the Throne of God, past the tree of life, again offering year-round fruit, and now also providing desperately-needed healing to the nations. It's a clear message for us!

Both the people who wrote the early chapters of Genesis, and John of Patmos who gave us the book of Revelation, were writing at a time of community crisis. Each of their communities was crushed by a powerful, upstream empire; Babylon and Rome respectively. Each community was looking for God to help them with the terrible suffering they were enduring. Their misery was caused by the same thing; the selfish abuse of power by a ruling elite; people of the great cities who sucked up all the goods, and ultimately even the lives of the people of the lands they colonised.

The first river flowed out of Eden *to water the garden*. People were placed in this garden which was able to provide for everyone's needs. Yet some wanted more, and they took it, bringing a curse on the ground, our Mother. Human *development* has been a curse on the land ever since. And yet in

Revelation, at the end, God is offering the River of the Water of Life again. This time, very surprisingly, it's coming from a city to bring healing to the lands; to a *renewed* Earth, not a new one.

The river at the beginning of our Scriptures and the river at their end both bring life. They are one and the same river. They're a beautiful image of God coming to us both from our past and from our future along the stream of eternal life. One of the most amazing things about God's relationship with us is that God approaches us in all time. God comes from our past as we saw in Genesis, and in today's vision from Revelation, we also see God coming to us from our future. And all the while, God is with us here and now. Do we choose to be upstreamers, entitled and detached, or downstreamers, Earth's grateful servants and committed protectors? Amen