Season of Creation: Ocean Sunday

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1C: Job, Ps 104, Eph 1, Lk 5

I find the ocean to be a restorative wonder. When I sit on a cliff top or walk on a beach to the accompaniment of the slow, rolling crash of the waves, the way they roll towards me, ceaselessly pounding the shore, then thunder past, off into the distance; I don't know how or why, but it has a life-giving effect on me. Even an hour at an ocean beach with its steady heart-beat of crashing waves can have a wonderful renewing effect, somehow connecting me with the Infinite.

The Pacific islanders we met in Fiji say that the ocean unites their islands – it doesn't separate them; the ocean is what connects them. That's different from our usual way of viewing large bodies of water as barriers or dangers to be negotiated.

I think I get it – that for island people, the ocean forms a connection, not a barrier. And for these people, the ocean doesn't just supply their material needs; it's a daily spiritual necessity. The Fijian Methodist minister, James Bhagwan told us how his daily prayer always *has* to be on the water. Swimming or paddling or simply floating, he finds his deepest connection with God in the gentle embrace, the rhythmic movement, and the playful, refreshing power of the ocean. I thought about James floating in prayer when I saw this morning's reading from the book of Job. – that startling image – [38.8] *the waters of the sea burst out from the womb*. Just sit with that for a moment; *the [primordial] waters of the sea burst out from the womb.* Whose womb?

Let's picture James; floating on that ocean which burst from

the womb to envelop him in prayer. His prayer enacts something we need to know about; a connection with this vast life-bearing body of salt water and so with God – the embrace of the water *around him* connects with the prayer that wells up from *within* him. For James, ocean and prayer together embody connection with the source of our being; floating in prayer; a respite that takes us back to the safety of time before our birth. I wonder do salt-water baptisms recall the amniotic fluid of our physical birth?

Rev James helped me explore the *spiritual* significance of the ocean as the medium from which God called, and still calls life to emerge. And what life! I've always been lost in wonder at its teeming life; the giant kelp forests and seagrass fields, the lesser-known lungs of the world; and every shape, size and colour of living being, ranging from the bacteria around hot-water vents, vast shoals of tiny plankton and innumerable krill to the great whales – the largest animals ever to have lived.

I wanted to speak about the ocean today in that sense; the sense of its partnership with God both as a revelation of God's majesty and of God's creative delight in the diversity of life and in sustaining it through evolution. I wanted to speak of the ocean's divinely inspired partnership with wind, sun and moon in the provision of a life-giving and life-sustaining biosphere of staggering power, beauty and diversity. I wanted us all to sit and watch David Attenborough shows together and simply bask and float in all these wonders. But there are other things needing saying too.

I didn't want to give an environmentalist's rant, but it's part of the truth. I won't make it long. The past week has brought more stories of our civilization's abusive attitude to the ocean; two reports, one downgrading the Barrier Reef's health, and another about its water quality,* and then the secretive handling of the Australian chief scientist's report into prospective oil drilling in the Bight. They come on top

of new studies of the ‘great Pacific garbage patch’, an island of plastic garbage almost the size of Queensland**; studies showing that micro-plastics are now measurable across the entire food chain – including us; reports of plastic bags mistakenly eaten by turtles, birds unwittingly feeding their babies bits of plastic so they starve to death; dolphins and whales snared in discarded fishing lines and nets drowning in senseless unseen agony; ocean acidification, oil disasters, gross over-fishing, super trawlers turning the seabed into a desert, all in addition to rising seas inundating island nations. The litany goes on, and we must not let it be silenced. We know where silence leads. The ocean is an expression of God’s love, and it’s being systematically killed as we watch.…There, that’s the end of the rant for now.

It *is* right that the ocean should supply us with food, just as Lake Galilee did for Jesus and his friends. But there is no place for the sort of abuse and greed that lies behind what I’ve just catalogued. There’s a thoughtful observation about today’s Gospel story by an Indonesian pastor in a village Bible study group. He said *‘In vv 6-7, we see a case of income equality and a spirit in Peter that shows no egotism. But if he hadn’t shared with his friends, his [boat] would have sunk and [he and] his friends would have had no fish.’*

A woman in the group responded, *‘it seems to happen just the other way round in our society. For instance, foreign employers drain our fish and our properties for their own profit without sharing or making any adequate compensation.’* *** The people at the bottom of the heap know what’s going on, and we should listen to them.

One more story. I had the chance to read Bruce Pascoe’s book *Dark Emu* recently. Using the documentary evidence written by early explorers and settlers, he describes Aboriginal agriculture and river and ocean aquaculture before white settlement. In a chapter on aquaculture, he writes of their vast fish traps off the shore near Bermagui and Pambula (p.

70-1), and off Wellesley Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria (p. 90-1). But for me, the most astounding account is of a whaling partnership between the Yuin people (southern coastal NSW) and Orcas. (p. 71) There'd be a regular ceremony begun by a man on shore where the orcas responded by herding a whale inshore. The people would kill the whale, and then share it with other clans and with the orcas – who always got their favourite bit, the tongue. The partnership ended instantly and for ever when a European man shot the lead Orca.

If there's a take-away message for Ocean Sunday, it's partnership – connection. Our civilisation is alienated from nature, and so inevitably from God. And we are spreading our alienation – proclaiming our 'standard of living' as an end in itself, completely disconnected from its consequences for Nature.

This is a profoundly spiritual disease which we as God's people are called to name and to challenge.

Alienation from God is a pretty good working definition of sin – living as though God is not there; as though God doesn't notice what's going on. And a telling sign of that alienation is our growing disconnection from the natural environment which sustains us and all life – our steady destruction of Earth.

I believe the call of Ocean Sunday is to reconnect with life's Mother, the ocean;

to care for her and let her care for all the life she sustains;

to speak for her where her voice is being ignored;

to support and protect others who are speaking out, and to refuse to let them or ourselves be silenced.

Let's commit to pray together with Rev James and today's

Psalmist

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it!
Amen.