

Christians, water and petrol

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Creation Sunday, 25th September 2005

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 11-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

As you know, today is Creation Sunday. It is an opportunity for us as Christians to give thanks for all the wonders of God's creation. It is also an opportunity for us to reflect on how we as a society are respecting and caring for God's creation and perhaps acknowledge our misuse of the bounty of creation and ask forgiveness and wisdom to work for the good of all creation. I want to talk to you about two topics which are currently close the hearts of many Australians and in particular politicians and the popular press — that is the drought and petrol prices.

But first I want to share with you some thoughts on two of the key drivers for our current environmental problems — the economic growth fetish promoted by mainstream political and economic commentators — and mass consumerism.

I should acknowledge that I will make a number of broad generalisations although it is worth noting that the overall picture is not nearly so straightforward or black and white.

Economic Growth

Rowan Williams (Archbishop of Canterbury) has recently argued that we should stop measuring wealth solely in terms of Gross Domestic Product and should instead include human and natural capital in any measure of national wellbeing. GDP is often seen as an infallible technical barometer of a nation's progress. If GDP growth is around 3-4% then all is right with the world.

The answer to almost every societal problem is 'more economic growth'. Unemployment is rife: only growth can create the jobs. Schools and hospitals are underfunded: growth will improve the budget. Protection of the environment is unaffordable: the solution is growth. Poverty is entrenched: growth will rescue the poor. Income distribution is unequal: growth will make everyone better off.

However despite the high and sustained levels of economic growth in the developed world over the past 50 years — growth that has seen average real incomes increase several times over — are we any more satisfied with our lives now than we were then? And has the natural environment (that is God's gift of creation) become degraded?

As Rowan Williams has recognised economic theory does not take account of environmental and social costs. They are typically treated as externalities — ie too difficult to measure and are therefore left out of the equation altogether. To put it another way, if environmental and social capital are being degraded by economic activities and are not being considered as part of the wealth equation, then they are in effect subsidising our economic growth.

I should balance these remarks with some of the advantages of a strong economy, e.g. reduced mortality rates, improvements in human health, modern communication systems — but we must ask ourselves are those benefits being shared equitably and at what social and environmental cost?

Let me give you an example of the economic-environmental disconnect — the Exxon Valdece. You will recall this was a huge oil tanker which ran aground in 1989 in the pristine Prince William Sound off the Alaskan coast — spilling 267,000 barrels of crude oil (surprisingly this is only the world's 28th worst oil spill). Now in purely monetary terms there was significant economic activity generated by the massive clean up effort. So because there

was no significant human loss and no value was placed on the wildlife or the natural environment, this was seen as a positive economic outcome — a rather perverse outcome.

Let me now move to the second key driver for environmental degradation — Consumerism — which currently goes hand-in-hand with continuous economic growth.

We live in a society dominated by consumerism. We are daily bombarded with advertising for the latest must-have gadgets which are said to increase our standard of living but which rarely improve our quality of life and more often make our lives more complicated. I was thinking last night of examples and recalled that I once saw an advertisement for an electronic pasta cooker — I remember thinking at the time "haven't these people heard of saucepans!" It was not long after that I realised that my family is the proud owner of a rice cooker — which is extremely convenient gadget and cooks excellent rice but I need to ask myself whether I have fallen into the consumerism trap.

At our current levels of consumption we are living beyond our means — Professor Ian Lowe, the head of the Australian Conservation Foundation, states that the world community is now using approximately 125% of the world's resources (nature's annual output). So in effect we need an additional quarter Earth if we are to sustain our current consumption patterns. The picture is much grimmer if we consider Western consumption patterns. If everyone in the world expected the same standard of living as people living in suburban Canberra, we would need an additional 6 planets to service our resource addiction!! Remember too that the prevalent political and economic paradigm is for continued economic growth.

In other words the standard of living to which we aspire already has us substantially in debt to future generations, this is becoming especially clear in the consequences of our over use of water which I will discuss shortly.

I want to make one final point about consumerism. Australia's consumerism is incredibly wasteful. A recent study by the Australia Institute found that on average each Australian household wasted \$1200 on items purchased but unused in 2004. This equates to over \$10 billion dollars annually which exceeds spending by Australian governments on universities and roads. This research also showed that Canberrans — who are on average are the most wealthy in the nation — are the most wasteful in the nation. So the question arises, are we treating our natural resources and God's creation with the respect it deserves?

Let me move now to the two areas of recent media interest — water and petrol.

Firstly Water — today's Old Testament reading recounts the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt. The reading reminds us of the importance of living within our means and to live in harmony with rather than against our environment (God's creation).

Water is incredibly abundant. It covers more than 70% of our planet's surface area. 97.5% of all water is saltwater, Of the 2.5 % remaining less than 1% of the freshwater is usable. So around 0.01% of the world's water is available for human use.

The last 5 years of drought have made Australians acutely aware of the scarcity and preciousness of water. It has also lead to some behaviour change which is both encouraging and necessary.

Water is a good example of our current misuse of our natural resources (our disrespect for God's creation).

- Water overuse (in the 20th century world population tripled while water consumption increased 7 fold — Australians use around 10 times the recommended basic water requirement per person per day of 50L — ~300-500L/day),

- wastage (irrigation — open channels — losing vast amounts of water to evaporation) 1% of domestic consumption is for drinking — therefore we are using treated drinkable water for 99% of purposes where some form of reused water of a lower quality would suffice.
- contamination (we pollute our waterway with pesticides, Detergents, organic chlorine compounds, sediments)
- inappropriate use of water — eg the massive Cubby station in Qld which uses more water than it takes to fill Sydney Harbour to produce cotton on the driest habitable continent on Earth. Rivers downstream of Cubby station are drying up and we should query the equity of this situation
- over allocation of "water rights" by successive governments
- And yet some parts of the world have inadequate water supplies — with around 1.1 billion people lack access to clean drinking water.

Is this a wise use of a precious and God given natural resources?

I want to quickly read a couple of the alternative 10 commandments which were distributed at Synod in Goulburn recently.

Water (in theory at least) is renewable however petrol is not — although it is a commodity we take for granted and that we use with total disregard for future generations.

Petrol — Everyone is talking about the petrol crisis — there seem to be petrol summits on a daily basis. However the reality is that Australia has some of the cheapest petrol prices in the Western world.

There has been a shift away from 4WDs and a dramatic increase in the use of public transport which again is encouraging and necessary. As a cyclist I haven't yet noticed an increase in the number of bikes on the paths but I look forward to sharing the paths with disgruntled motorists.

The great irony of the "petrol crisis" to my mind is that it may have been exacerbated by the tragic yet natural events in the US (the oil rigs which were damaged off the coast New Orleans by Cyclone Katrina) — is this God trying to tell us something? It is also somewhat ironic that it could be the burning of fossil fuels which has increased the severity of the storm that ravaged New Orleans.

Like water, petrol is a natural resource that we take for granted, misuse and complain about when it is not as readily available as we would like. Are we complaining like the Israelites in today's Old Testament reading?

I conclude by saying that we are not without hope and that I for one remain cautiously optimistic. There are some interesting developments in the Kyoto Protocol entering into force, superannuation firms offering socially and environmentally responsible investments. There is also practical action we can all take to reduce our impact on, and give greater respect to God's creation.

Tim and Shane Woodburn, who have kindly invited us into their solar passive home immediately after today's service, have greatly reduced the greenhouse gases by passively heating and cooling their home. At the same time they have undoubtedly created a much more pleasant and comfortable home to live in.

It needn't cost vast sums of money either. Simple action — but it is often a matter of being aware in the first place. It's important that we are all aware of our consumption patterns —

think about the hidden resources — eg juice (2 L of petrol and 1000L of water), paper (1 tonne of paper requires around 100 tonnes of various raw materials), energy (70% lost, 20% lost, then we waste it by running appliances unnecessarily, leaving lights on etc etc). Influence producers and suppliers eg — buying organic, green energy etc.

I argue that we as Christians have a moral obligation to tread lightly. An obligation that is greater than non-Christians.

Finally I want to show you all the most important and profound reason for being aware and taking action where you can regarding our use of natural resources. [*Stephen intended to hold up his youngest child. But Noah was nowhere to be seen! So instead he ad libbed on the wonders of creation that Rob had been asking the children about at the start of the service.*]