Water of life: life’s foundation

Water is the foundation to life, and no living thing — human, animal or plant — can survive without it. This biological and sociological fact is declared in both creation stories (Genesis 1 and 2), where we see that water was part of the stuff that God used to create other things, shaping it into different oceans and allowing it to bring forth all kinds of creatures, and then causing rivers to flow through Eden to water the ground.

God created the world ex nihilo, “out of nothing”, and so we know that God must have created water, but these creation stories point us to a deeper truth namely that water is so foundational to life, that it is as if God finds water already there when he starts creating the world.

It means that God could not have begun creation if there was no water. All things come into being because of water. When water is removed, then the foundations for life are also removed.

The people of biblical times knew just how significant water was for life. This should not surprise us at all because the Bible is about people’s lives, and water is deeply connected to people’s lives.

What is important to remember is that so much of the Bible is written in a very dry context — where water was and is extremely precious.

One thinks of water flowing from the Sea of Galilee down the Jordan river bringing life to its shores, but then also of it flowing into the Dead Sea where it symbolised water that had literally become so dead that no living thing could live in it. Again one thinks of the slaves’ experience in Egypt where the River Nile was a constant reminder of the life-giving power of water, but then also of the 40 years in the wilderness without access to much water.

In this kind of geographical situation, it is no wonder that flowing rivers feature prominently in the Garden of Eden, and in the vision of the New Jerusalem recorded in the book of Revelation.

The biblical experience of the scarcity of water, is part of our wider human experience as the following figures indicate. Only three per cent of the available water is fresh (not sea water), and of this three per cent, only one per cent is surface water (rather than ice caps, glaciers and groundwater), and then just over half of this surface water is actually accessible in lakes and rivers (rather than in soil moisture, atmospheric water vapour and within living organisms).

In reality we only have the use of 0.00016 per cent of all the water on the planet! This translates to 40,000 cubic km. But even this incredibly small percentage is skewed by the way that the accessible water is distributed. Close to 60 per cent is available in only nine countries, with Brazil alone having 14 per cent.

Hydrologists say that when a country has over 1,700 cubic metres per person per year it experiences water sufficiency. Between 1,000 and 1,700 cubic metres it experiences water stress, and below 1,000 cubic metres they speak of water scarcity.

On this scale, 505 million people in 31 countries are experiencing water stress or scarcity, and on current trends, this will rise to between 2.4 and 3.2 billion people by 2025.

This will have a dramatic effect upon human health, economic development, food production and natural ecosystems.

Indeed, already it is estimated that 6,000 children die every day for lack of water.

This is why the Seventh Millennium Development Goal (MDG) is “By 2015 to reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe water and people with no access to basic sanitation”.

Water was there at the beginning of creation (Genesis 1:2), and was the precondition for God’s creation of life on earth (Genesis 2:5). Scientists remind us that it is still the precondition for life on earth. The lack of access to water for so many people on God’s earth is therefore a huge challenge for Christians who recognise that God has created the world in and through water, and see that it is “very good”.

To this challenge we turn in the next articles.

Rev Dr Steve de Gruchy begins a four part series on the relevance of water to life and faith.