Water is part of God's creative generosity, says Rev Dr Steve de Gruchy but human action has corrupted the blessing

Previously we noted that the Bible indicates there could be no creation and therefore no life without water. In this way the Bible recognizes that the provision of water for our lives and livelihoods is a gift from God. We see this in the creation stories where the garden of Eden is endowed with an overflowing abundance of rivers for use in tilling the land.

The key way in which the Bible recognizes that water is a gift from God is when it speaks of rain – which is after all the fundamental way that water comes to us. God "prepares rain for the earth" (Psalm 147:7-8) and "gives rain on the earth and sends waters on the fields." (Deut 5:9, 16). Indeed, he "has not left himself without a witness in doing good – giving you rains from heaven." (Acts 14:17).

There is deep symbolism in this: the Hebrew worldview understood that he had been the ground, we lived on the ground, and God lived in the heavens.

Anything that happened up there like the stars and the sun was connected to God – and rain is special because it comes from heaven and falls down to the earth, and makes things grow. In this way it is a very special gift from God. It is a blessing.

It is very easy to proclaim this. But to be honest, water is not experienced as a blessing by many people in this globe. We abuse this gift from God in two significant ways: we are increasingly using our withdrawal of water in ways that benefit only a few, while at the same time our actions lead to a steady decrease in water availability often at the expense of the poor.

In terms of increase, we currently use 54 per cent of all accessible renewable fresh water, but if current trends continue, then by 2025 this could rise to 70 per cent, and 10 years later to 90 per cent. This dramatic and unsustainable increase is due to five key factors: patterns of industrial production, intensive agriculture, the lifestyles of consumer society, international tourism to arid or semi-arid regions, and population growth.

At the same time, there is a decrease in water supply for these significant reasons: climate change leads to a disruption in rainfall patterns, with flooding and droughts on the increase, while higher temperatures lead to increases in evaporation. Deforestation has interrupted the hydrological circle, leading to faster water run-off from catchment areas. Waste – domestic and industrial – has seriously affected the quality of water supply, and pollution in the face of changing circumstances means that huge amounts of water are lost.

In such ways, human beings are not being stewards of God's gift of water, and the impact upon human life is dramatic. There are huge discrepancies with regard to water use, related to issues of affluence and race. For example it has been suggested that the pattern of illegal Israeli settlements in Palestine is closely related to the presence of water. On a wider scale the average per-capita use of water suggests that access to God's gift of life seems to be very dependent upon nationality: about 47 litres, Asia 43 litres, United Kingdom 334 litres and the USA 578 litres. This has led people to speculate that future wars will be fought over water supply.

Likewise our degrading of water has important consequences. The World Health Organization estimates that four million people die annually from water-related diseases such as typhoid, cholera, dysentery, hepatitis and gastrointestinal, as well as from parasites that inhabit water and illnesses transmitted by water breeding insects, like mosquitoes and malaria.

In the dry country of Zimbabwe the word for rain, pusu, is also used as a blessing: and its significance as a sign of prosperity in the life of the people is that it is also the name of the national currency. Likewise, we believe that God uses the gift of water to create and sustain life are surely called to bear witness to this blessing from on high.