

Study 1: The Oceans

And God said, 'Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1:9-10)

Icebreaker

Why is a walk within sight and sound of the sea considered to be such a positive experience?



Christian Mølsted, *Fishing boat in rough seas near Dragør, pre 1920*

So much water!

If we are to start anywhere with our thinking about water, it should be the ocean, as it covers over 70 percent of the Earth's surface. It absorbs the sun's heat, provides us with rain and drinking water, and acts as a heat store to help regulate temperature on land. It is home to a vast array of animal and plant life, from single-celled organisms to blue whales.

Much of the oxygen we require for life (perhaps 50-80 percent) comes via oceanic plankton — drifting plants, algae, and bacteria that can photosynthesise, floating on the surface of the water. A bacterium called *Prochlorococcus* produces up to 20% of the oxygen in our entire biosphere.

The impact of humans on the oceans is extensive. Overfishing reduces diversity. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates around 30 percent of fish stocks are either fished to capacity or over-fished). But fishing also leaves discarded fishing nets which kill fish, birds, and marine mammals.

Oil spills from merchant shipping and tankers, fertiliser runoff from farmland, pesticides and fertilisers, can all be lethal to sea life. Human waste (particularly plastic) is everywhere, as seen in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch between Hawaii and California, estimated at 79,000 metric tonnes of plastic, of which a large percentage began life as fishing nets, now broken down into tiny particles. Plastic waste is being found in washed-up carcasses of birds and mammals.

A 2018 survey (Foresight Future of the Sea, for the UK government Chief Scientific Advisor) paints a gloomy picture of plastic pollution tripling by 2050 unless we take active steps to prevent these materials reaching the oceans.

Climate change, and increasing levels of greenhouse gas, are warming the oceans, leading to rising sea levels (threatening coastal populations). Sea levels worldwide have risen by around six-tenths of an inch per decade since 1880.

Sample

Warmer waters may promote the development of stronger storms in the tropics, causing property damage and potential loss of life. Alongside this, freshwater from melting glaciers is gradually slowing the circulation of sea currents

around the world, which if it continues will eventually cause a general cooling of Western Europe and North America

Sam

Discussion

- Q) Based upon your own knowledge and insight, list the ways you can see the oceans as a valuable resource.

- Q) Have you walked along the strandline on a beach where the incoming tide has pushed seaweed, driftwood, shells, and other debris, before leaving it and retreating? What do you recall seeing there?

- Q) Scientists warn us of the potential problems arising from rising sea levels and temperature. Do you believe the world is attentive to this call, and is there more that the Church, or we as individuals, could do to engage with issues such as this?

Water - as a Blessing

(Read Deuteronomy 8:6-18)

It is perhaps easy for Christians to consider the provision of water as a blessing from the Creator. But is there more that we need to understand?

The relationship between God and the people we read about in the Old Testament was one of a cycle of obedience and disobedience, often depending upon how comfortable, or difficult, life was at any one

moment in time. Moses warns them that prosperity often leads to forgetfulness.

Not that God looks down on those who have wealth, as well-known characters such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job and David were all wealthy people. It is more about how what we have, or do not have, affects our relationship with God and our neighbours.

Discussion

- Q) How do the last two verses speak into the human situation, both historically and today?

- Q) How easy is it to take the natural resources that this world provides for granted, and how can that impact on faith (Read Proverbs 19:17)?

- Q) Why might the condition and health of our oceans have received low priority in the past?

people

Water - as a route to trade, wealth and downfall

(Read Ezekiel 27:1-7, 12-27)

We have considered that prosperity might lead to forgetfulness, and this passage is a lament for the downfall of Tyre, which was a major Phoenician seaport on the Mediterranean coast of southern Lebanon, just a few miles north of the modern border with Israel.



Hiram, king of Tyre, provided building materials for Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem in the 10th century BC, although the political influence of wealthy merchants somewhat limited his power.

Ezekiel's lament is over the pride that led to its downfall, presuming itself to be 'perfect' through all its acquisitions and business connections. One thing that God does not like is a pride that is full of self-conceit and lives that are centred purely on self.

At the end of this passage is a picture of a sinking ship, laden with all the accumulated wealth of the nations and the pride of this people. A heavily laden ship disappearing beneath the very waves which had enabled its owners to build such a profitable empire.

Discussion

Q) Control of the seas has been important throughout history with its many wars and disputes. In what ways are our lives enriched today by those who sail the seas?

Q) Historically, can you think of examples in which powerful merchants have used the seas for profit at the expense of others, and where evidence is visible even today?

Water - to be treated with respect

(Read Acts 27:13-44)

Luke gives us a detailed account of first-century seamanship and conditions on the eastern Mediterranean, as Paul and some other prisoners find themselves in the custody of a centurion called Julius setting sail toward Rome.

As a Roman citizen, Paul would have enjoyed more comforts on the voyage than many. Here he has Luke and Aristarchus for support (Acts 27:2). It is not the best time of year to be sailing, and a poor

decision regarding over-wintering leaves them vulnerable to hurricane force north-easterlies which endanger the ship, its crew and passengers.

The sailors and soldiers work tirelessly to maintain control of the ship, and a situation that was frightening for all involved. Paul has a word from God and acts upon it, just as the crew are attempting to flee in the lifeboats, and so the centurion Julius assumes control. Luke mentions that these

exhausted men had gone without food for days (v. 33), so there is prayer and a breaking and sharing of bread.

Despite the ship running aground and breaking up, and a host of nautical detail from Luke, no-one loses their life, and they reach land as God had promised.

There are some similarities with the scene on Lake Galilee (Luke 8:24) when Jesus calms the storm amid the growing panic of

his disciples in the boat. Jesus could have prevented the storm from causing his friends distress, but their understanding would be that it was during the worst of the storm that Jesus was with them.

This can be also be our own experience. God allows us to weather the storms of life knowing he is there with us, bringing us safely to the shore.

Sample

Discussion

Q) Paul's faith is strong enough to cope with all that life's storms throw at him, and he is quick to use the situation as a mission opportunity, calming the soldiers, getting them to eat rather than panic, using his God-given authority to take control of the situation. Is there a lesson here for Christians?

Q) Oceans can be calm, but when stirred up by the energy of a hurricane or earthquake, they can be very destructive. Where do you see the destructive power of the ocean, and how should those who govern respond?

Q) Has your understanding and respect for the oceans that surround us increased, and will that change anything in your life?

For further thought, prayer and reading

Pray for the continuing involvement of governments around the world in tackling the issues that are increasing global warming and causing sea levels to rise. Pray also for those islands and coastal regions who are seeing an increased frequency of extreme weather, flooding, and erosion.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/topic/oceans>

<https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/ocean-oxygen.html>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/habitats/ocean/>

<https://www.epa.gov/climate-indicators/oceans>

<https://scied.ucar.edu/learning-zone/climate-change-impacts/melting-arctic-sea-ice-and-ocean-currents>

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/join-and-donate/donate/appeals/sealife-guardians/our-work-for-sealife/why-our-seas-are-vital/>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/saving-our-seas-president-obama-oceans-conservation>