

Ruminating on Rivers

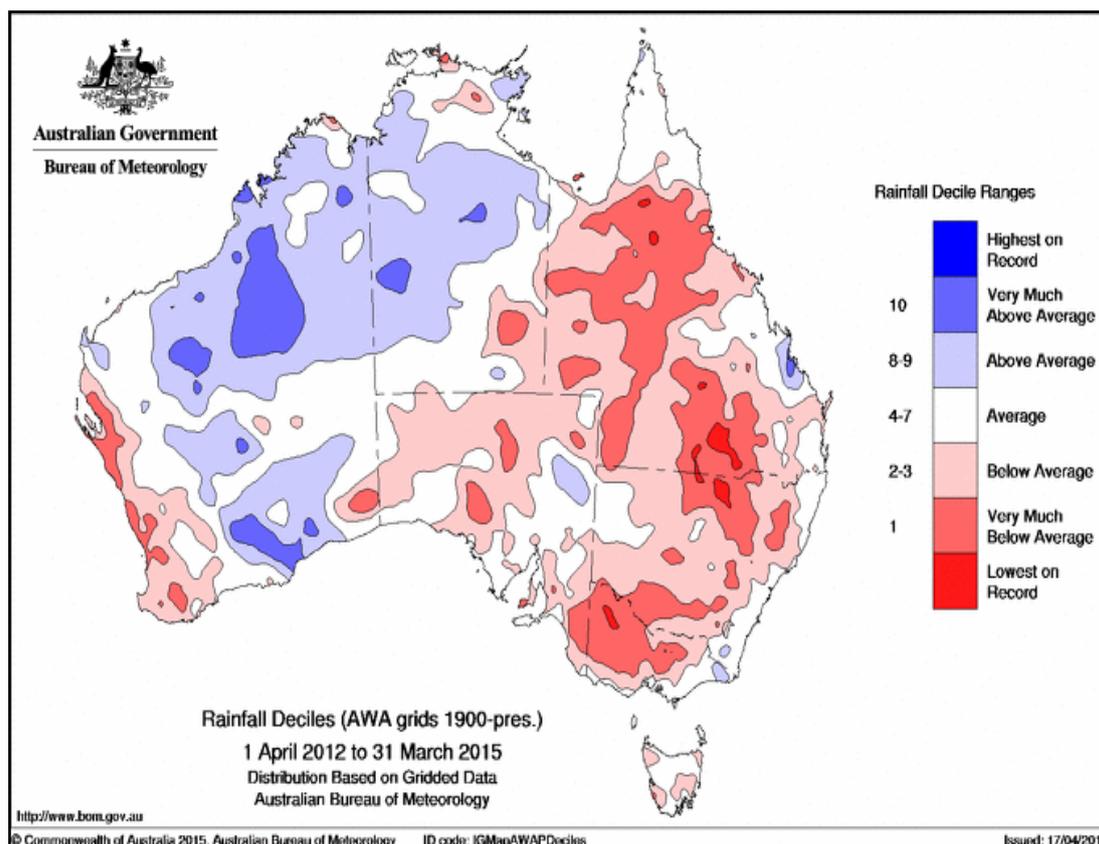
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For the wrong reasons the Murray-Darling Basin has been back in the news. So is much of Australia. We are in drought again, and that includes much of the Basin. A few months ago my wife and I joined a group of mostly Uniting Church people who, led by Dorothy and Paul Creek, bussed from Wagga Wagga to Uluru and back, learning about what it means to “Walk on Country”. In the course of our journey we met and got to know some of the people of several aboriginal communities involved in the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. That was important, but so was the chance to “check out country”. What was this drought, green in places, parched in others, really like? Generally, Australia’s droughts strike hardest west of the “sandstone curtain”. It looked to me what has since proved to be the case. The further south we ventured the wetter it seemed to be. Which is a positive way of saying that in northern New South Wales it looked dry.

“One swallow does not a summer make,” goes the saying. As I write this in Camden Theological Library, North Parramatta, adjacent to Lake Parramatta, one of Sydney’s early dams and water supplies, it’s been raining solidly all day, but meteorologists have been telling us that annual average rainfall started decreasing in Western Australia in the 1970s, and that trend has been moving slowly eastward, for example:

“National rainfall for 2018 was 11% below the 1961–1990 average, with an Australian annual total of 412.8 mm (the 1961–1990 average is 465.2 mm). Compared to rainfall since 1900 (119 years), this makes 2018 the 39th-driest year on record. Annual mean rainfall (mm) for Australia since 1900.” [Jan 10, 2019, Annual Climate Statement, 2018; bom.gov.au]



Rainfall trends in Australia over the 3 years, 1/4/2012 - 31/3/2015

As evidence for a drying trend this is still equivocal, but reports we city types are getting from west of the Divide are certainly worrying. The Bureau of Meteorology’s Annual Climate Statement, 2018, shows that the drying trend is now most pronounced in the south-eastern quarter of the continent,

precisely where the Murray-Darling Basin is located. That is important because the Basin is Australia's most significant source of food and fibre. Over a decade ago, when I was researching a PhD in ecotheology that built on studying the Basin, the figure was 40%. Last year, however, Australia imported wheat from Canada, and this year farm sector income is likely to have declined again.



Given – Alison Carr

With those reports of drying climate and green drought come tiredly familiar reports of quarrelling between the various jurisdictions (Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the ACT) and stakeholders (dryland and irrigation farmers, miners, environmentalists and others) over water allocation, fracking, coal mining, environmental flows and the like. There were the reports of water theft, of protests at the scope, even the bare existence of environmental flows. There were threats at a state level to abandon the Basin Plan that was agreed upon during John Howard's tenure as Prime Minister. There were the inevitable environmental disasters, followed by recriminations and ministerial "doubling down" (to use one of those new Americanisms!) And there were, of course, horrible images of mass fish kills caused by too little, too hot and too de-oxygenated water in the Darling River. "Was this the face of climate change?" some wondered.

Personally, I felt depressed and disillusioned. I've taken a keen interest in ecology and ecotheology since my first placement in Northern New England, on the Basin's north eastern fringe, in the late 1980s. From that time onward I've probably encountered most of the attitudes to nature doing the rounds in Australia. "Doing the rounds" might be a good way of describing our national environmental debate, and particularly the debate over the Murray-Darling Basin. You may have encountered those white T-shirts with "SMP" emblazoned across the chest. Sex. Money. Power. The unholy trinity, at least one of which you can generally find at the cause of any societal problem. For all the good people trying and succeeding in making a positive difference (and I have met many), I was hearing the same bickering, greed and powerlust I'd heard a decade before when studying the Basin intensively and read about in histories of

European settlement of the Basin in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

“What’s the point?” I wondered, dispiritedly. “I’ve been giving this environmental stuff my best shot for 30 years, and it doesn’t seem to have done much good.” But there’s no use in criticising. (Though I have now done some of that!) All that does is tar everyone with the same brush. Besides, I *am* a city slicker. What would I know?

I had coffee with a colleague, who reminded me that I’m not God’s employee. According to St Paul we followers of Jesus don’t work *for* the Holy Spirit; we work *in* the Holy Spirit. The Murray-Darling Basin is God’s Basin to restore, renew, or do whatever God wants to do with it, not mine to fix, although it is vital that we participate in God’s work. And I thought, “If love is so central to our Christian faith, perhaps if I share some of the love I have for rivers in my life it will put others in touch with their stories of rivers. Because rivers are really, really important to human and nature’s flourishing. So I decided to celebrate the importance of rivers to our societies and civilisations by telling some of my “riverine stories”. Here goes.

The first encounter with a river I remember having was seeing the mighty Niagara Falls, created by the Niagara River that marks the border between the US and Canada. Actually, “seeing” is an incompetent choice of word to describe that visceral experience. What I remember best was riding in an open carriage, and that there was spray everywhere! I was 3 at the time, but this experience must have impressed me: it’s one of the few experiences I remember from the 2 years at the beginning of my life my family spent in North America and Fiji.

My next significant encounter with a river was with the Herbert River in Far North Queensland. In 1962 my family returned to Australia and to far north Queensland, home territory for my parents, but new for me. As I said, I was a city slicker, born in Sydney. Living in the village of Macknade on the banks of the Herbert River was an adventure. I remember riding over the rickety old wooden bridge spanning the Herbert and into the regional town of Ingham during a flood. Passenger vehicles had to be carried across the bridge on the trays of trucks to avoid being submerged, and perhaps even washed into the river.

I also remember being left to myself while my parents took my younger brothers somewhere. There was only a levee bank between our house (which of course was built on concrete piles) and the mighty Herbert River. I climbed over the levee, found a dinghy, and started to play in it. When my parents found me they fairly freaked out! One day a year or so later I gained a better appreciation of the reason for their upset. The school bus I was travelling in passed the Macknade pub. There, tied to a post out the front of the pub, was a crocodile at least 3 metres long. On another occasion I was walking along the levee by the Herbert River to Sunday School in the little, wooden church that stood almost literally in the shadow of the huge Macknade sugar mill, the reason for the village's existence. A Red-Bellied Black Snake crossed the path right in front of me. I'm not sure which one of us moved faster, in opposite directions - the snake or me! My nickname during those days of the early '60s, when the Concorde had just started flying across the Atlantic, was "Supersonic". That Sunday morning I probably justified it!

After 2 years we moved back to Sydney, where I spent the rest of my childhood and adolescence. In the scouts we spent a fair bit

of time mucking about in the creeks that fed Middle Harbour. My favourite running track crossed one of these creeks via a bridge that also supported a pipeline. It felt good to be able to access the bush so close to home, but I was a little disappointed that so few people were doing that. After university I moved to inner city Glebe, where the water courses were cemented in and sometimes over. These days we can tell where they were from the lines of trees we see on google maps.

I moved to India, where I worked for several years in a Leprosy hospital in the district town of Salur, which stood on the banks of the Vegavathi River. Compared with our Australian rivers the Vegavathi was huge, yet I'd be very surprised if you have heard of it. Rev Prof Dean Drayton, a former President of the Uniting Church, tells a story that also works for my experience of India. Dean once attended a conference in the United States. When he arrived at his destination he joined a group of delegates who just happened to be discussing the question "What made America great?" Not "great again", but great in the first place. Somebody thought it was the pilgrims' Christian faith. Someone else was convinced it was the influence of the Founding Fathers. Others ascribed this greatness to good ole Yankee get up and go, still others to private enterprise, the capitalistic financial system. Dean listened for a while, then said, "I've just flown here from the world's driest continent, Australia, and across your great country. The thing that particularly struck me was how well-watered America is. My flight crossed river after great river. Your country is richly watered. I think that it is your rivers, and the abundance of your water that has enabled America to be great."

I have travelled by train from one end of India to the other, crossing in the process I don't know how many long bridges over

great rivers. I would say that Dean's opinion on the importance of water and rivers has much to recommend it. Let's check that.

If I say "Thames", what do you associate the river to? London, of course!

"Seine"?	Paris!
"Hudson"?	New York!
"The Nile"?	Cairo!
"Rome"?	Tiber!
"Rhine"?	Cologne, Bonn, Strasbourg!
"Indus"?	Most of Pakistan!
"Jamuna"?	Delhi!

By the way, there is a persistent legend that a third great river, the Sarasvathi, joined the first two at a city called Allahabad. While that takes us to palaeogeology, it also takes us to the role of rivers in religion, a theme to which I shall return. A few more riverine associations:

"What are China's two great rivers?"	Yangtze and Yellow!
"Myanmar"?	Irrawaddy!
"Southeast Asia"?	Mekong!

What about Australia? Ours is the driest continent, but each of our major cities has its water source. Melbourne has the Yarra, too thick to swim in, too thin to plough, say rude Sydneysiders. Hobart has the Derwent, Adelaide has the Torrens, Perth the Swan, Darwin has the Darwin River and Brisbane has the Brisbane River. Sydney has several rivers, including the Tank Stream, Parramatta River, the Cooks River, the George's River, the Lane Cove River (whose navigable length I have kayaked) and the

twice named Hawkesbury-Nepean (on which I've kayaked from Windsor to Ebenezer).

And my point is...?

That rivers are essential for human civilisation!

In Australia I think we get the best sense of how vital rivers are by paying attention not to the short rivers that sustain our cities, but to the great Murray-Darling Basin that has sustained 40% of our nation's agriculture. Yet it's almost as though we demand more of the Basin's waterways than they are capable of giving. Both the Murray and the Darling Rivers feature in the list of the world's longest rivers, but in terms of the volume of water that passes between their banks to the sea they are relatively insignificant. About 1 millionth of the volume of water flowing down the Amazon River, the world's largest river by volume, flows down the Murray and, apart from during times of flood the Darling has far less water even than this. Anthropologists, historians and archaeologists think that aboriginal people lived in greater concentrations along the lower Murray River than anywhere else in Australia, that they lived in at least semi-permanent structures and that they were substantially clothed against winter's chill in the south of the continent, but their lifestyle was still far less environmentally costly than ours is.

If rivers are essential for human civilisation it's no wonder that they feature in the world's religions. The Nile and several of the Indian rivers are some of the best examples of this. The primary role of the Egyptian Pharaoh was to intercede in the spiritual realm to ensure that the annual flood down the Nile happened. Compared with the Nile the Jordan River is puny yet, similarly,

one of the Bible's basic motifs is "the River of the Water of Life". Here are some of the stories caught up in this motif. Fleeing Egypt's army the Israelites were enabled to pass through the Red Sea when God by Moses' agency divided it. The Red Sea is not a river, but it is valid to include this basic story from the Exodus because it, too, points to a powerful God who provided salvation for his people. The Israelites kept forgetting this. When they complained at the lack of water in the Sinai desert Moses struck the rock at Horeb, causing water to flow out. (Exodus 17.1-7) At what were later called the Waters of Meribah, Moses again struck the rock and again water flowed out. But because Moses had not obeyed God he was not permitted to enter the Promised Land. (Numbers 20.2-13) Instead, it became Joshua's task to lead the Israelites across Jordan. On this occasion the water piled up, enabling the people to cross the riverbed, when the feet of the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant touched the water of the Jordan.

Another two rivers, the Euphrates and Tigris, became symbols of Israel's bane and sorrow. By the way, the Tigris and Euphrates, so well-known to this day, are joined by two other rivers whose identity is a mystery, the Gihon and the Pishon, in the Bible's first mention of the theme of the rivers of the water of life, in Genesis 2. But the city of Babylon, capital of the Babylonian Empire, built between the two great rivers where they came close to each other, became a symbol of exile, captivity and death for Israel:

"By the waters, the waters of Babylon
We lay down and wept, and wept for thee Zion.
We remember thee, remember thee, remember thee Zion."

...sang Don McLean, remembering Israel's grief.

The prophet Ezekiel lived during the time of Judah's Babylonian Exile. In a vision which is recorded in Ezekiel 47.1-12 the prophet foresaw the restoration of hope: the river of the water of life flowing from the temple and out into the land, healing and restoring it. God's New Creation, and the project that will bring it about, is not simply personal restoration of a small nation's fortunes. That is simply the smaller, nearer to hand event that in Israelite prophetic tradition points to God's greater, more distant goal. But the end of the Babylonian Captivity was wonderful in itself. Let's stay with it for a while.

Psalm 126 was probably written when Judah's Babylonian captivity ended. The psalmist's joy is palpable:

*"When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
'The Lord has done great things for them.'
The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.
Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves."*

The prayer that God restore Israel's fortunes like the watercourses in the Negeb, and that those who sow in tears may reap with shouts of joy, is fitting for those caught up in Australia's current drought.

Ezekiel's dearly held desire was improved upon in the Bible's last chapter. In fact, Ezekiel 47.1-12 functions as a kind of model for Revelation 22.1-5. The latter depicts the River of the Water of Life flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb out into the city, the new Jerusalem, down the main street, flanked by the trees whose leaves were for the healing not just of Israel, but of the nations, and which fruited monthly. This theme, the river of the water of life, stands for and points to God's new Creation.

In John chapter 7 we reach the climax of this great theme. On the final day of the nine day long festival of Sukkoth, which commemorated God's provision of water by Moses striking the rock at Horeb, Jesus interrupted the great ceremony by saying:

"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."

The evangelist explained that:

"By this He meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified."

That is Jesus' promise to you. To us who have been "later to receive". The River of the Water of Life is the Holy Spirit who indwells Jesus' followers, His friends. God is about Restoration

and New Creation. God the Spirit will achieve and is achieving this in and through us, flowing out from us, into the world, to heal the world.

I'll finish by telling you a little about my two other favourite rivers. I lived beside the Beas for two years in its guise as a swift, turbulent young Himalayan stream. Once, however, while circumventing a Punjabi roadblock, we discovered it in its guise as a plains river - enormously broad and much slower flowing. It crosses India's geologically irrelevant border with Pakistan and becomes a tributary to the Indus. Just as the Murrumbidgee, by whose levee at Wagga Wagga, I lived for several months after leaving the Beas, becomes a tributary to the Murray.

Tributary. A tributary brings what it has to the greater. Even the Amazon, which brings 809,000 cubic meters of water each second, is tributary to the Atlantic Ocean. There is much that ruminating on rivers can teach us.