

Westgate Baptist Community  
Sunday 18 September 2005  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Creation Series – “River Sunday”

Revelation 22:1-5

**“Reconnecting with the Source of Life”**  
by Geoff Wraight

“The Earth is the mine says the Lord – Discipleship and Ecology” was the title of the Baptists Today Conference that Ross, myself and Gavin Mountjoy attended last month. It was held in a converted old 1930’s mansion on the steep banks of the Yarra River (or Birrarung) in Lower Plenty.

It is a beautiful place and despite the encroaching development, the Templestowe park and reserve allows the River and its surrounds to be a reminder of the beauty of the natural and original landscape. There are many places in urban Melbourne where you can stand by the Birrarung and glimpse a patch of natural landscape.

Now Lower Plenty happens to be next door to the Montmorency /Eltham/ Greensborough area where I spent the first 21 years of my life. So on a free afternoon during the conference I decided to go for a little drive over the hill to visit my childhood home and streets which I hadn’t done for many years.

Nostalgia is defined as “a mixed feeling of happiness, sadness, and longing when recalling a person, place, or event from the past, or the past in general”. As I pulled up outside the ordinary looking white weatherboard house on the corner of Mountain View Road and Hume Street, and walked down the driveway I began to have a fairly serious nostalgia attack! I knocked on the door and no one answered – so I plucked up the courage and went for a walk around the house. The house itself is still very much as we left it with the additions, paths and old shed that I used to climb onto the roof of when I was a boy – all still there. The front garden was so neglected that I hardly recognized the features that I remembered from 30 years ago – except for a big old Camphor Laurel tree still in the corner.

We have all had this experience at one time or another and there is nothing essentially wrong with nostalgic feelings. But I think that nostalgia can lead to a paralysing feeling that nothing will ever be as good as it was then.. We look back on the heady days of our youth or of a time in the past when things were different and see only through very rose coloured glasses. Then we judge everything that happens now in the light of this limited idea of some wonderful past that didn't actually exist.

There is however another way nostalgia or memories of the past can enrich and deepen our sense of identity and possibility. And that is when a sense of place and connection to place is invoked.

I decided to leave the house and drive down the steep windy Hume street into the Plenty River gorge. I parked at the bottom near where the little foot bridge over the river was. I remembered the freezing cold mornings when I would walk the couple of kilometres down this road in the winter dawn to cross the icy bridge in the half light and mist, then walk up to the train station to catch the 7am train to the city when I was a young apprentice working in South Melbourne in the late 1970's.

I walked up onto the middle of the little arched bridge and stood looking up the river gorge with its overhanging branches and slowly moving water. Again the feelings of nostalgia came flooding back as I took in this peaceful scene.

But something happened in that moment that transformed my sense of place. I suddenly had a image of young Wurrunjeri children playing and fishing on the banks of the River below me long before there was any bridge to stand on – long before the land of my childhood home was claimed by the crown and subdivided for housing.. Long before Captain Cook was even thought of. Long before the Enlightenment expansion of European Interests. Long before the dark ages or even the Roman Empire. And there is evidence to suggest that the ancient people of this land were living and fishing in the rivers of this area even before Abraham was born...

I looked up and around at the hills and features of the land around me. And I thought of how the River has been a source of life for so many thousands of years for so many different people. Yes, I am the third

generation descendent of Scottish immigrants but I am also born of this place and I belong to it. The ancient people of this land knew this and often wanted to share this sense of belonging to the white faced new arrivals but seldom our ancestors listen.

People and cities all over this planet always gather and thrive near the rivers great and small that drain the land of that most precious of resources – fresh water. The River is a powerful symbol of life and the source of life. And while the Plenty River is just one of many smaller tributaries that flow into the Yarra, it was for me a defining feature of the land that renewed a sense of connection and belonging.

The ancient indigenous people of this land and indeed for some of us here our own Celtic ancestors new instinctively how important it was to remember that we are part of the earth and the earth is part of us, that in a real sense we are all sons and daughters of creation. Scientists and Environmentalists have been telling us this for many years now but it is sometimes hard for us City Dwellers to hear and take in..

David Suzuki in a little book entitled, “You are the Earth” speaks of this in some engaging ways,

Did you know that the next breath you take will contain dinosaur breath? It sounds weird, but it’s true. Here’s how it works. Air is really a mixture of several gases. A gas is a light, invisible substance that floats freely in the air – steam for example. Two of these gases, nitrogen and oxygen, make up almost all of the air.

There is only a small amount of the gas argon in the air. yet and American astronomer named Harlow Shapely calculated that each breath you breathe out, or exhale, contains about 30,000,000,000,000,000,000 (30 zillion) atoms of argon. (That’s the kind of things scientists like to figure out).

In a few minutes, those atoms you’ve exhaled travel right through your neighbourhood. In a year, they will have spread all around the Earth, and about 15 of them will be right back where they started – in your nose. Argon is always in you and around you. And not just in you but also in your best friend, your favourite pop star, the birds, snakes, flowers, trees, and worms. All of us air breathers are sharing those same argon atoms.

So here's where the dinosaur part comes in. An interesting thing about argon atoms is that they never change or die – they stay around forever. That means that thousands of years ago, an Egyptian slave building the pyramids breathed some of the same argon atoms that later Joan of Arc, Napoleon, and his horse breathed. And some of those were argon atoms exhaled by dinosaurs that lived 70 million years ago. They all breathed out argon atoms into the atmosphere – ready for you to breathe in as you read this sentence. And when you exhale your next 30 zillion argon atoms, some of them will one day find their way into the noses of babies not even born yet.

What's true of argon is true of air in general. Air joins together all of Earth's creatures – past, present and future.

We are all part of this one Earth and the Earth is part of us. And though in the past parts of the Bible have been used to justify exploitation of the land there are many examples of a Creation theology that calls us to respect and care for the land. But even more powerful is the Biblical understanding of a Creator who is source of life pulsating throughout the earth and constantly renewing and restoring the creation.

Images of new life and ultimate salvation and restoration in the Bible also have this idea.

We read earlier that wonderful vision of John in the book of Revelation, of a renewed creation and restored city that has at its beginning and foundation – yes, A River of Life. In a real sense this image of The River of Life once again being the source of renewal and restoration at the end of the Bible links with the river in the story of the Garden of Eden at the beginning of Bible.

Water is an image and symbol that comes up all through the story of God's people and indeed of Jesus himself.

We begin our life walking in the water of our mother's womb. Seventy per cent of our bodies is water. In baptism we are again born of water and the Spirit. All the water on Earth is recycled. Ultimately we have shared the same raindrops as Moses or Jesus. We wade in the waters of life from conception to cremation.

We survive because of the waters of life, every day. Yet we are often oblivious to this life force within us and around us, God present in the waters of life.

The challenge to us today is simple. Our faith is in a God who is not only the living creative force in the Earth but who has become through Jesus involved in its struggle to survive and be reconciled.

We face huge challenges to reverse the mindless exploitation of our precious planet and its shared life. The mission of God is indeed a call to all of us to be involved in the reconciliation of people with Creation and with God who is the source of life. We are called as God's people to recognize again our mutually dependent relationship with the Creation and find our sense of belonging in it.

How can we do this?

Well for starters you don't have to be a tree-hugging greenie to reconnect to the land around you. We all need to experience a sense of belonging that is essential as a basis for respect and the action that is needed.

Here's a few simple suggestions:

1. If it is not too difficult make a pilgrimage to the place of your birth and look around at the landscape or learn about the indigenous people who once lived there. Find the nearest river or stream and even stand in it and let the water flow over your feet. If you are new to this land stand near or in a local river and remember the place of your birth and the rivers that were the source of life there too. Remember that this Land welcomes you as it is part of the shared Creation. Alternatively, if you have the opportunity, go on a pilgrimage to some of the sacred sites of this land like Kakadu or Uluru.
2. Learn about the rhythms of the seasons here in Melbourne. A simple seasonal calendar (OHP) that is based on local indigenous knowledge has been on our wall now for a number of years. It makes more sense and fits better with the seasons as we are experiencing them. It helps in a small way to be grateful for the

rhythms of this land and to feel a sense of connection with the original custodians and with the land itself.

3. Keep your hands in the earth. Even if you are not a gardener, you can still appreciate gardens and growing things. Walk in a local park or even better a native reserve, look at the trees and plants and animals and remind yourself that these living things are part of you and they of them. Even if you don't have a profound spiritual experience the fresh air and exercise will be good for you.
4. Get involved in an environmental organization or project to conserve water, restore native vegetation or minimize harmful waste. There are lots of ways to do this that range from changing simple habits in the home to investing your business in green consultancies and environmental practices.

Feel the breath of God move softly  
gentle mists across the skin;  
Earth is breathing God's own spirit,  
life renewed from deep within.  
Sing a song of living waters,  
pulsing through the veins of Earth.  
Turn again be united  
With the Source who gave us birth.