

**Opening service of Lenten campaign “Seven Weeks for Water”
1 March 2017, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia**

Sermon by the Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, general secretary of the World Council of Churches

*“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”
-Amos 5:24*

It is time for Lent as we prepare for the celebration of Easter, the crucifixion and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is time for justice. It is time for water justice. It is time for we who are here and all human beings to stop resisting justice. We cannot in the long run stop justice, as we cannot stop the water.

Nature and justice are connected in many ways. Our human behaviour, good or bad, is subordinate to nature, to which we belong. Jesus says that God lets the sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain onto the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45). We can only live from the grace of God’s nature. We are all part of nature, we all need fresh air, clean water, food that contains proteins and carbohydrates drawn from what is alive on this planet. We cannot live without oxygen and water.

This is also why it is such an unacceptable injustice if human activity and structures make it impossible for other human beings to live properly from the nature we share. It’s an injustice if the rain does not fall on everybody, or if somebody cannot live from the land on which they live or drink from the water that flows, or if they cannot breathe the air that surrounds them. In the long run human activity cannot ignore the balances of nature. The water will flow, or roll down, even if we do not want it so, even if it will be as a judgement.

The prophet Amos uses the image of water to say something clear and strong about the justice of God. This is, therefore, also one of the most encouraging, motivating and hopeful verses of the Bible for the many, many people yearning for justice and recognition of their rights as human beings: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

What do you see and hear when you hear these words?

Hearing this verse, I see before me tall waterfalls thundering down cliffs, in the mighty rivers ending in the majestic fjords of my home country Norway. In recent years there are also waters coming in ways that destroy homes and roads, as has not happened before. I see mighty rivers in other continents, for example the Biblical river Tigris - as some of us crossed on a visit to Iraq a month ago. Or I see the tiny Jordan river, that has such a great symbolic role in Biblical stories, but also today in the struggle for justice in the Holy land. I see before me also the dry lands of this continent that are with their people, animals and plants thirsting for water to come, for justice to roll down.

One of the basic lessons for us human beings is about water. When you play with it, or try to swim in it as a child, you have to learn about the power in the waves and the depth of the sea, or the power in the stream of the river. You cannot cheat water. It always shows the power of gravity, it is going downwards. Whether it rolls or flows or only drops, it will find its way.

The images of the water of the prophet Amos is both overwhelming power and the ever-flowing stream. They convey dimensions with both a sense of power and of the steady flow. It is irresistible; it will come, either way. This is the character of the justice and righteousness of God; for some a threat - for others liberation.

For all of us it is a word from the prophet Amos about the reality of unsustainability that comes from all injustice, upon all who “trample on the poor and take from them the levies of grain” (5:11). We stand not only in relation to creation, but we are facing the God of creation.

The judgement is related to the blessing that was meant for all. Water is also the strongest element of life-giving blessing. It entails what is needed for all creatures on our planet. The Bible speaks of waters of life, because water is and remains the most precious source of life on our planet. It all started with water. The first creation story of the Bible reminds us that water is a basic condition for all life on Earth (Genesis 1). The next creation story in Genesis 2 is told from the perspective of drought and deserts: The land was dry, and without the rain, no life could be on earth, especially not human beings.

Water is to be preserved, protected as clean, and to be shared for the benefit of all creatures and the wider creation. Those listening to Amos knew this very well. They knew what water scarcity and drought meant.

While Justice and Peace has been at the Council’s core value from its inception, WCC’s commitment to ecological justice was witnessed way back in the 1970s when it had recognized the connections between justice, peace, and ecological sustainability, much before the UN mechanisms had thought of addressing these issues.

At the Vancouver Assembly in 1983, WCC started Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation, which became popular as the JPIC process.

In 1988, the WCC launched its Climate Change Programme.

In 1990, the WCC sponsored the World Convocation on Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation in Seoul, Korea. Climate Change was at the centre of one of four covenants at the Seoul convocation.

The WCC strongly engaged with the preparatory process and the follow-up to the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) summit in Rio de Janeiro.

From the very first Conference of Parties - the COP1, till the recent COP22 in Marrakech, the WCC has been participating, representing the voices of faith

communities, as a moral and ethical voice of discernment to address climate change with a justice and rights framework.

September 1 was proclaimed a day of prayer for the environment by the late Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I in 1989. Pope Francis has now taken this message to the Catholic churches. For a long time, the WCC has observed the Time for Creation from September 1 – October 4, every year. The Catholic churches now join hands with us in doing so.

The Lenten campaign: Seven Weeks for Water is yet another sign of the WCC's commitment to ecojustice and sustainable development, where we recognize water as a gift of God and a public good, accessible to all for their nourishment and good health.

Water should be drinkable, accessible and affordable for all; it should not be made a commodity that only the rich can afford. However, that is the reality, and it adds to the injustice that clean water is so hard to provide for so many in this continent of Africa.

Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace

At the Post Bussan Assembly of WCC in 2013, we embarked on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace involving our member churches to journey with them, to see together what it means to follow Jesus Christ in this world longing for justice and peace.

As this year WCC's Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace is focused in the Africa region, we wish to journey with you, accompanying you in healing your wounds and struggling with you for justice and peace.

Water and sanitation is a major issue, which perpetuate poverty, injustice and inequalities in our societies.

According to the World Health Organisation and UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP):

- around 663 million people are without access to safe drinking water
- 1 in 3 people, or 2.4 billion, are without improved sanitation facilities.
- the JMP report indicates, a vast majority of the above live in sub Saharan Africa region:
- 319 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa are without access to improved reliable drinking water sources.
- 695 million of a global 2.4 billion people living without improved sanitation facilities live in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- women and girls are responsible for water collection in seven out of ten households in 45 developing countries.

In the above context, the Africa region badly needs water justice. There is a strong linkage between water, food and climate change. Water affects the holistic development of any country. It is a matter of global accountability to one another that we have to address the negative effects of climate change. It is a matter of international solidarity. It is, however, also a matter of good, accountable governance in each country and each local community, to provide proper access to clean and affordable water, and to address the severe effects of a lack of water in the emergency of drought like this country experiences periodically, also at this time.

During this Lenten period, the World Council of Churches calls all of us to focus on the water crisis affecting your region and continent. This means that we drink water mindfully; giving thanks to God for the water that somehow is made available to us, praying that drinkable water each day must be made available to everyone thirsting for it. For us as churches, we work with all partners – like some of our church agencies for development - to do more to provide access to water in every village, available for every home.

We cannot use fasting as a tool to take God hostage and seek God's blessings as ransom. The prophet Amos tells us otherwise. God is least concerned about our assemblies, about our offerings, and songs and praises. God is not concerned about a fasting that is superficial, if our lifestyles, behaviour and most importantly attitudes, are not changed. The true fast according to God is "to loosen the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke."

As the WCC's Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace this year is focused on Africa, we hope your stories and struggle for justice and peace will become the stories and struggle for the churches around the world. May this Lenten season help us to reflect on these issues more deeply. May the Seven Weeks for Water during this Lent help us to highlight the water crisis in Africa where the highest numbers of people in the world live who are deprived of having access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation.

Let us proclaim again in this particular place, on this particular day, under this particular theme, the words of hope that the prophet Amos gave us, "Let justice flow like water, and righteousness, like an unfailing stream" (Amos 5:21-24).

Amen