

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

**01 September 2015 – The Day for Creation**

**Delivered at the Metropolitan Cathedral, Brasilia, Brazil**

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

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

### **Waters of justice and life**

It is time for justice. It is time for climate justice. It is time for us who are here and all human beings to stop blocking justice. It is time to say that we cannot do injustice or violence in the name of God.

The justice of God will come, because the kingdom of God is coming. We cannot in the long run stop God’s justice, as we cannot stop the water.

This day, the first of September, is the Day of Creation. In the World Council of Churches we have called for a celebration and marking of this day together with The (Orthodox) Ecumenical Patriarch. This year Pope Francis has also called the Roman Catholic Church to celebrate this Day of Creation, a day together in “our common home”. He has asked that it happens together with the WCC member churches. So, here we are.

Nature and justice are connected in many ways. People who live close to nature, particularly indigenous people, have a lot of wisdom to share about how to treat nature to avoid that nature becomes our enemy. We can only live from the grace of God’s nature. We are all part of nature, we all need fresh air, clean water, and food that contains proteins and carbohydrates from what is alive on this planet.

This is also why it is unacceptable if human activity and structures make it impossible for other human beings to live properly from this nature we share. It is unfair when our human actions causes climate change so that the rain does not fall or some get life-threatening floods. It is injustice if somebody cannot longer live from the land on which they live or drink from the water that flows near them, or they cannot breathe the air where they walk.

In the long run human beings cannot ignore the balances of nature, but we can disturb them and create injustice to others, particularly those coming after us.

The prophet Amos uses the image of water to say something clear and strong about the justice of God. This is 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 hear when you hear these words?

I hear waterfalls thundering down the cliff and majestic fjords of my home country Norway. Here in Brazil you are blessed with the monumental waterfalls of Iguacu and the mighty Amazon and with the Amazon basin, the biggest and largest freshwater system on earth. And you have the enormous coastline with the waves coming in by its own rhythm, all the time, sometimes as a pleasure, sometimes as a threat to life.

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 danger in the stream of the river. As an adult I have built my house and I wanted it to be dry and safe for both rain and snow. I have tried to make a bathroom with a shower properly. I know that I cannot cheat water. It is always going downwards. Whether it rolls or flows or only drops, it will find its own way, downwards.

The images of waters of the prophet Amos is both the overwhelming power and the ever-flowing stream. They convey both dimensions: a sense of the 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 this is a threat, for some a comfort or liberation.

For all of us it is a word today from the prophet Amos about the 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 the middle of creation, but before the God of creation: “The one who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the

morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the surface of the earth, the Lord is his name, who makes destruction flash out against the strong so that destruction comes upon the fortress.” (5:7-8)

Water is the strongest element of life-giving blessing, it falls on the earth as part of God’s continuous act of creation. 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 all life on our planet. It all started with water. The creation story reminds us that water is a basic condition for all life on Earth (Gen 1:2ff.) It is to be preserved and 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.

All this is familiar to you here in Brazil, you also know about a lot of water and you know about droughts. The rivers are themselves affected by the consequences of deforestation of the big rain forests. Deforestation together with Climate Change leads to diminishing rainfalls. What you do with your water and nature here in Brazil - as you know – do have an impact of both the local, national and global realities.

Very often such huge projects as dams, canals, roads and railroads bring into the open deeply entrenched inequalities and conflicts between the powerful economic and political interests and the local, indigenous people, living of the resources nature offers.

In your country as in all countries in the world, the issues of justice are at stake. They became even more dramatic when they are connected to the climate changes and the destruction of nature, particularly if we pass the line of no return. The poor suffers already the most of these climate changes, and the poor have fewer resources for mitigation and adaption. But it will affect all human beings, wherever they are, and where their children and grandchildren should live.

Reflecting on these realities and acting for justice and the rights of people to a life in dignity, the churches in Brazil and CONIC, the national council of churches, continue to address ecumenically concerns for justice, respect for human rights and democracy. We remember, for instance, how you pushed the delegates of the Porto Alegre assembly in

2006 to come up with a statement on “Water of Life”, urging the churches and ecumenical partners to create the Ecumenical Water Network that fosters cooperation for water justice.

### **God, in your grace, transform the world**

After the Porto Alegre assembly the president of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil, Rev. Dr Walter Altmann, was elected as moderator of the WCC Central Committee for the following years until the 2013 assembly in Busan, Republic of Korea. He, together with many others creative theologians from your country and the region of Latin America helped us to explore the theme of the assembly, “God, in your grace, transform the world,” in very concrete ways reflecting the reality of people in Latin America.

The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the turning point in this transformative process of redemption, reconciliation, liberation and new creation. The cross and the resurrection teach us that there is never a point where God cannot bring new life, and there is no human being or nature that is without the presence of the God of life.

Redemption, salvation and justification by grace is the common basis for our work together. We share the righteousness of God because we have received it for free. Absolutely free, in faith.

This righteousness, this grace of God, shows that there is no partiality in God. God gives freely, as God creates all of us, all of us, in the image of God. This justice and peace that we are called to share is for the relationships between all human beings, whoever they are and what they believe. How can there be religious intolerance and violence in the name of this God of life that has come to us in Jesus Christ? How can there be discrimination and attacks on people from the Christians in this country that can stand against the judgment of God, the creator of all?

Latin American theologians have helped us to see that the word of God is a gift and a power of transformation of church and society and our relationship with creation.

An example of such care for the entire society and its future has been the engagement of the churches for human rights in Latin America during the time of the military dictatorships that controlled and oppressed people here in Brazil and also in the other countries I am visiting on my journey: Argentina, Chile and Colombia. We handed over from our WCC archives a few years ago copies of the files of the archives in Geneva from the project “Brasil: Nunca Mais” to the office of the Federal Prosecutor General. This was our way of contributing to the national memory of Brazil.

Searching for truth and reconciliation, we need the conscious effort “not to forget” – or in positive terms, to remember what happened to the victims of human rights violations. Not to forget and to remember are key in the process of reconciliation, and of building just peace. It is a right of the victims and the whole Brazilian society.

In this and other ways, we can see transformative grace at work. It is an example that can encourage people and churches in other countries; for example, in the Middle East, Sudan or Colombia, to bring truth to the surface so that reconciliation can happen and justice will be done. But also here in Brazil this call to justice must for the benefit of all be observed in every period of the life of the nation, also today.

### **A transforming pilgrimage**

“God, in your grace, transform the world” – The Porto Alegre Assembly of the WCC was followed in 2013 by the Tenth Assembly of the WCC in Busan, Republic of Korea. Delegates gathered there under the theme “God of life, lead us to justice and peace”. Thus, the theme went one step further. Consequently, the assembly delegates called on the churches and all people of good will “to engage in transformative action and to join a pilgrimage of justice and peace.”

The contemporary context requires the churches not to stay in their comfort zones but to go beyond the status quo. We need to move forward together, crossing boundaries, looking for each other, strengthening relationships and sharing our deep motivations and faith commitments along the way – to care for our common home. This is also what I

hear in the encyclical “Laudato si” from Pope Francis. We need to respond in unity to our common call.

What does it mean and require of us as churches to move forward together with others – also partners from other religions – into a common future for the human family?

This broader horizon of the future of one human family requires a far less institutional and more open ecumenical approach beyond the existing membership of the WCC. We need to be together on the way with the Roman Catholic Church and also with the growing communities of Evangelical, Charismatic and Pentecostal churches, trying to overcome the differences we experience.

Dear sisters and brother, this is the day to seek the unity in our faith, following the Lord of creation and the God of grace together. The world deserves that we do so. A life as disciple of Christ can never be a life in selfishness or discrimination against others, and particularly not against those who are less privileged. There is only one common future for humanity, not many and not just mine.

When will we really hear the word of the prophet Amos?

While God’s justice is powerful, like a great river, it does not have to come as a destructive flood washing aside everything that is in its way and submerging all life. It can come as life-giving water and give us new life.

The call of Christ we share is not to dominate, but to serve. Sometimes that means to stand up together against the powers of discrimination, of violence and injustice. The word about the day of Lord, the day of judgement, is a call to turn around, to change direction. Therefore, the word of judgement is not a word of oppression or pessimism or fatalism; it is a word of change, a word that calls for transformation. It is a word that can bring liberation and hope for all of us. That is why we shall read and hear these words, also today, as we celebrate the day of Creation.

So: Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!  
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, o God of life.  
Amen.