

SJW Eco Church Sunday – with baptism

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

“Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”

In 2011, NASA reported that *“Two teams of astronomers have discovered the largest and farthest reservoir of water ever detected in the universe. The water, equivalent to 140 trillion times all the water in the world's ocean, surrounds a huge, feeding black hole, called a quasar, more than 12 billion light-years away.”*¹

Water has been around since the earliest days of the universe, long before the earth was formed and I dare say it will be around long after the earth ceases to exist. Water appears to be a prerequisite for life and is one of the markers that highlights for astronomers the possibility of life elsewhere in the universe.

¹ <https://www.jpl.nasa.gov/news/astronomers-find-largest-most-distant-reservoir-of-water/>

Water is crucial to life on earth and we have it in abundance. From space the earth appears like a blue marble floating in the dark void. The first pictures of the whole earth taken from space hardly cause a stir amongst the younger generation now, but to my generation and earlier the Blue Marble photograph as it's become known was breath-taking and awe-inspiring. In December 1972 thanks to the crew of Apollo 17 we suddenly had a completely new perspective on our planet home. We wondered at its beauty and we were humbled by its fragility.

At about the same time, a few scientists began suggesting that the biggest danger to this fragile earth was from the activity of one animal - an animal that could adapt to live in virtually every habitat on earth - an animal that could even adapt the environment to make it more habitable for them - Humans. They warned that humans might be changing the environment unknowingly and in an uncontrolled way – that things were getting out of hand.

At first their views were considered a bit wacky, and many dismissed their claims as mere scare-mongering. But from these small beginnings the environmental movement was born and has grown from being a fringe concern to being arguably the most important issue facing the human race.

In the UK, Friends of the Earth was launched in 1971 and many Christians took to campaigning on environmental issues. In 1983 the international Christian environmental network 'A Rocha' was formed (A Rocha is Portuguese for 'the Rock')

It was as late as 1990 that the Anglican Communion agreed to add a further Mark of Mission to the 4 it had adopted in 1984. The 5th Mark of Mission is "to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth"² For 34 years the Anglican Communion has recognised the

² <https://www.anglicannews.org/features/2020/02/the-anglican-communions-five-marks-of-mission-an-introduction.aspx>

environment as one of the five main missional responsibilities of churches.

In 2016 A Rocha launched the Eco Church initiative with this explanation:

“Eco Church is a learning community of churches of all shapes and sizes open to all denominations. It provides a framework to support your church and its leadership to take practical action on caring for God’s earth, through the Eco Church survey. The survey covers five key areas of church life:

- *Worship and teaching*
- *Buildings*
- *Land*
- *Community and global engagement*
- *Lifestyle”³*

The eagle eyed among you will have spotted that St. James is not only registered with Eco Church but has

³ <https://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/#:~:text=Eco%20Church%20is,Lifestyle>

qualified for the Silver Award which acknowledges the work that has already been done by you and the PCC in tackling its environmental impact. We proudly display the award mark on the header of the newsletter and on the church website. And it's good that we celebrate the work that that award represents. But there is always more we can and must do and we also need to ensure that we continue doing what we claim to be doing in our award submission. It's very easy to rest on our laurels.

To that end, the EcoGroup would like to know what you think they should prioritise as part of our work to gain the Gold Award. But they would also like to know what you might be prepared to get involved in. You've been given a copy of a short survey which gives the questions and answers we gave and on which we need to concentrate. There are 13 questions under Community and Global Engagement; 5 under Lifestyle; 4 for Land; 7 for buildings; and only

2 for Worship and Teaching. (We've already made the Gold standard on this area) It would be great if everybody could complete the survey before they leave this morning. So please draw a star against the things you think we should be prioritising, and a tick against those you can help with in some way. Please put your name on it and an email and/or phone number so that we can contact you about the survey.

As I said earlier, water is crucial to life on earth and we have it in abundance. But you can't have failed to notice that it is not evenly distributed. In the past few weeks we've heard of droughts in the Horn of Africa and at the same time floods in much of central and eastern Europe, hurricanes in the United States and typhoons in Taiwan and elsewhere – all evidence of increasingly disturbed weather patterns caused by the climate crisis.

Water is the source of life but can also threaten it.

It's no surprise that water has become a key symbol in the Judeo/Christian tradition – think of the waters of creation and the flood; the parting waters of the Red Sea; the many occasions when Jesus talked about himself in terms of being the source of living water; his own baptism in the waters of the River Jordan. And in this morning's gospel where Jesus transforms the Jewish Harvest Festival of the Booths with its daily libations of water poured out in the hope of future rains when he says that *“Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.”*

Fr. Damian will echo many of these in the prayer over the waters in preparation for the baptisms of Ryan, Neda and Farshad [at the 10am service].

We thank you, almighty God, for the gift of water to sustain, refresh and cleanse all life.

Over water the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation.

Through water you led the children of Israel

*from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land.
In water your Son Jesus received the baptism of John⁴*

So as Farshad, Neda and Ryan come to be sustained, refreshed and cleansed by the living waters of their baptism, we too are given the opportunity to renew our own baptismal promises alongside them.

And in addition to that perhaps we can also take this opportunity to make another vow in light of the 5th Mark of Mission. If you feel you can make this personal commitment I hope you will answer

“With the help of God, we will.”

People of God, in acknowledgement of the climate crisis humankind has caused, and as an expression of our shared Christian Mission will you “strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth?” **“With the help of God, we will.”**

⁴ <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/christian-initiation/baptism-and#mm019>

I hope that this Eco Church Sunday will act as a spur to you, as it is to me, to look again at the ways in which we can each change our habits and lifestyle as a mark of the commitment we have made and the faith we profess.

May it be our prayer that 'out of our hearts may flow rivers of living water.'

Amen