Reflection by Thabo Makgoba

DR THABO MAKGOBA, ARCHBISHOP OF CAPE TOWN

In 2018, we were told that most taps across Cape Town, a city of 4 million people, would be turned off on April 22. ‘Day Zero’ would arrive when the water in the dams supplying Cape Town reached less than 13%. Schools and businesses would have to shut, people would have to queue to fetch their water, and the police were to be mobilised to quell potential fights over access to water. After three years of the driest winters on record and a one-in-300-year drought, the dams were nearly empty. Cape Town rallied as never before and we reduced our water demand by a massive 50 per cent. Week by week we pushed back Day Zero – until the winter rains came again.

How did the faith communities respond? Initially, we were on our knees praying for a miracle. But then we realised that we must pray for something deeper – we must realise again that water is sacred, a gift from god. We had reduced water to a commodity. We had lost the sense of sacredness of water, seeing it as ‘something that comes out of a tap’. As Christians, we become members of the family of God through the sacred waters of baptism, water is our primal element. Similarly, our Muslim brothers and sisters wash their hands before they pray, five times a day. Water flows through the pages of the Bible, the Koran, and many sacred scriptures. At the start of creation we read that ‘the spirit of god was hovering over the waters.’ At the end of the Bible, the Book of Revelation tells us that ‘the waters of life flow from the throne of god.’ Water rushes, gushes, and pours through the pages of the Bible in 722 verses! We must recognise again that water is sacred and commit to protecting it. If God has placed the care of this planet into our hands, then relying on prayer alone and doing nothing to safeguard this precious gift is theologically irresponsible. In 2018, churches started committing to water harvesting and use of greywater, checking for leaks as they called for rain in their prayers.

Secondly, we awoke to the reality of water justice – for many people in our city it is Day Zero every day of their lives because they must carry water from communal taps to their homes in informal settlements. It is said that you do not realise

the value of water until you have carried it. Cape Town is one of the most unequal cities in the world. On one side are homes with more bathrooms than people, with big swimming pools and vast lawns for a couple of children to play on. On the other side, nearly 20 per cent of Cape Town comprises informal homes where five or more families share one communal toilet and tap and, more often than not, the toilets are out of order. Girls are afraid to use the communal toilets at night for fear of being attacked and raped, and during the day children often play in the filthy water seeping from the poorly serviced toilets and polluted water running from homes. Clean drinking water and sanitation is the most fundamental human right. It is central to the well-being of all people on the planet and the lack of access to clean, fresh water is one of the most serious threats to human health.

The book of the prophet Amos poses a strong challenge: 'let justice flow down like rivers, and righteousness like a never-ending stream' (Amos 5:24). So, how can we, as the Church, respond to the challenges of water? We must protect our rivers and aquifers: in South Africa, half of our surface water comes from only ten per cent of the land – these 'catchment' areas must be protected as a priority. Cape Town is the only city to contain a catchment area – the Table Mountain water source area. The city's water demand has grown so it now draws most of its water from other mountainous areas outside the boundaries of the city. What a wonderful picture of 'water coming from the throne of god' – water flowing from the beautiful mountains that surround us. Water that must be treasured and protected.

The challenge is not just that the rains do not fall – many of the threats to water come from companies who pollute rivers with industrial pollution. In South Africa, we suffer greatly from acid mine drainage affecting our water systems. The shareholders of mining companies make a profit, but the local communities are left with water degradation. Large corporate farms are also responsible, as the run-off from artificial fertilisers and pesticides pollutes the rivers. We are holding 'courageous conversations' with the mining companies to challenge them on some of these environmental issues.

Churches are adopting local rivers as part of their spiritual journey – recognising them as their own 'River Jordan' – holding regular clean ups, putting in litter traps, planting trees, and taking shared responsibility. To care for our rivers we must become passionate campaigners against the scourge of plastic waste. At

our last synod, the Anglican Church of Southern Africa passed a motion calling for a ban on single-use plastic.

If we want to fight for water justice we must also fight for climate justice. Studies tell us that the results will be devastating if we do not act fast in the next 11 years. The rise in temperature threatens farming, dam levels, and our natural environment: plants, birds, and vulnerable amphibian species. Our food supply, water security, and economy will be under threat. We may not be around to see the worst impacts of climate change, but our children will be. In the end, the harsh uncomfortable truth is, we do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we are stealing it from our children. The Bible tells us in Romans 8:22 that ‘creation is groaning as in childbirth.’ This is an image of great suffering, but ultimately it is a vision of hope – the birth waters will break, and we will see new life come forth, clean water flowing from the throne of God and bringing healing to the nations. ‘Creation is standing on tiptoe waiting for the sons and daughters of god to be revealed.’ We have delayed too long; it is time to respond.

The most important message is this – if you want to do something, then change your lifestyle, influence your congregations and communities, and challenge your politicians and let us make fighting climate change the highest priority on all of our agendas.

Let me end with a challenge to us all. We have lived our lives by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. We were wrong. We must change our lives so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption, that what is good for the world will be good for us. This requires that we make the effort to know the world and learn what is good for it. It means living for the good of the community, for all of us, not living for our own individual ends. It means living the we and not the me.

In sum, let us end the indifference.

Let us end our indifference to the importance of water and its centrality in our faith and our lives.

The opposite of love is not hate – it is indifference.

The opposite of faith is not heresy – it is indifference.

The opposite of life is not death – it is indifference.

The opposite of hope is not despair, but indifference.

May we become agents of hope.