

Water in the Book of Common Prayer

By Jeffery Rowthorn | Volume 2.1 Fall 2015

The freighter plowed its way steadily across the North Atlantic as I stood in the prow of the ship, looking out over an immense and empty expanse of water. No other boats in sight, no sea birds, no jet trails up above, only water. For the third day in a row water, only water.

More than 70% of the earth's surface is covered by ocean water. Half to three-quarters of the human body is made up of water. A child's first home is in the water of the mother's womb. Our everyday vocabulary conveys the power of water to shape and misshape our daily life: tsunamis and hurricanes, spring rains and relentless drought, the Colorado River and contention over water rights, polluted coastlines and the Exxon Valdez, dirty rivers and streams, and the call for universal access to clean water.

Without water there is no life. More than food and clothing and shelter, it is needed if life is to survive. From the womb to the last sips taken by a person close to death, water is our close companion whose presence is all too often taken for granted but whose absence is dreaded. Is it an exaggeration to take Saint Paul's words to the Athenians (Acts 17:28) and apply them to water: "In [it] we live and move and have our being"? And what is true for us is true for every animal and plant. Water in all its life-sustaining abundance and awesome beauty is God's gift to all living things.

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You send the springs into the valleys;

they flow between the mountains.

All the beasts of the fields drink their fill from them,

and the wild asses quench their thirst.

Beside them the birds of the air make their nests

and sing among the branches.

You water the mountains from your dwelling on high;

the earth is fully satisfied by the fruit of your works. (Ps. 104:10-13)

The Psalmist celebrates the precious gift of water and is awed by the God from whom this and every good gift comes:

You visit the earth and water it abundantly;

you make it very plenteous;

the river of God is full of water. (Ps. 65:9)

The Lord changed rivers into deserts,

and water-springs into thirsty ground.....

He changed deserts into pools of water

and dry land into water-springs. (Ps. 107: 33, 35)

Mightier than the sound of many waters,

mightier than the breakers of the sea,

mightier is the Lord who dwells on high. (Ps. 93:5)

These and the twenty-eight other psalms that make reference to water are all part of the worship the Church offers to our Creator. If we look further than the Psalter, what place in our prayer and praise does water hold—the gift on which all life depends? The scope of this article is necessarily limited, so let us seek a partial answer to that question by examining just one liturgical resource—the 1979 Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church (BCP).

At the heart of the Episcopal Rite of Holy Baptism is the Thanksgiving over the Water (BCP, pp. 306-7), which begins with these words:

We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water.

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

Through it you led the children of Israel out of their

bondage in Egypt into the land of promise.

In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John

and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ

The second paragraph of the prayer thanks God for the water of Baptism through which “we are buried with Christ in his death . . . share in his resurrection (and) are reborn by the Holy Spirit. “

The celebrant then touches the water and prays that it may be sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit so that “those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue for ever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior.”

The rich biblical references and the cumulative use of prepositions (“over/through/in”) make this a memorable prayer to proclaim and to hear. However, what is remarkable is that, despite the opening words of the prayer, the water is not itself the gift for which we thank God. Instead it provides the medium through which the saving acts of God are *effected*. In that respect the water of Baptism is similarly the medium through which the salvation of those baptized is brought about.

Elsewhere in the Prayer Book there is a surprising absence of references to water. In the extensive section of prayers (pp. 814–835) there is just one petition—for rain “in this time of need” (no.43). In the section entitled *Thanksgivings* (pp. 836–841), no mention is made of the wonder of water in all its forms and the indispensable blessings that it brings to us.

Eucharistic Prayer C (pp. 370–372), which is notable because of its focus on the created order, makes no reference to water. In the Daily Office, Canticle 8 (p. 85) recalls Israel’s deliverance at the Red Sea,^[1] but once again it is God’s saving act that claims our attention.

Only the *Benedicite (A Song of Creation, Canticle 12)* celebrates the gift of water which responds to its Creator with exuberant praise:

Glorify the Lord, every shower of rain and fall of dew . . .

Frost and cold, ice and sleet, glorify the Lord . . .

Glorify the Lord, O springs of water, seas and streams,

O whales and all that move in the waters . . .

Praise him and glorify him forever. (pp. 88–89)

Here is one of the few places in the Book of Common Prayer where there is a clear echo of the Psalmist offering thanks to the Creator for God’s wondrous works in creation, water included.

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Why this drought? Why this dearth of references to water in the prayer and praise of the Episcopal Church?

In the first place, the prayer of Christians in the West has been largely focused on the redeeming life and work of Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior. In the past century the sanctifying and empowering activity of the Holy Spirit has come to the fore. Now, with a growing sense of urgency, God the Father is being celebrated as the “maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.” Those familiar words from both the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed are now being amplified with references to God as Creator in the Eucharistic Prayers and the Prayers of the People and in the Daily Office.

Secondly, this failure to celebrate both the Creator and the creation he has brought into being has led to a divorce between the staples of daily existence and their sacramental use in worship. A communion wafer has nothing in common with the crusty bread on our table; a sip of wine from the chalice bears little resemblance to a festive drink; a handful of baptismal water does not suggest being washed clean all over; a smudge of chrism on the brow is a poor substitute for anointing the body with perfumed oil.

By failing to use these elements of daily life liturgically in an immediately recognizable form, we diminish the close relationship between our sacramental worship and the created world we live in. This can lead to indifference to the material universe that impoverishes our worship and diminishes our sense of responsibility for the creation entrusted to us.

A third factor is the trivialization of the Rite of Holy Baptism. In his book, *Celebrating the Rites of Initiation*, James Turrell recalls the church in which he grew up:

The parish used a small bowl, no larger than a salad bowl, as the baptismal font. But because it was inconvenient to clean and polish this bowl, there was placed within it a Pyrex custard cup, about two ounces in capacity. The custard cup held the water to be used in baptism. This was such seriously impoverished symbolism as to render the deep language of the baptismal rite ludicrous If the vessel under consideration makes one snicker as one describes its contents as the waters of creation and as the Red Sea's tides, then one needs a larger vessel.[\[2\]](#)

This is an extreme example of trivialization, but the majority of baptisms even today make for a disjunction between the way the sacrament is celebrated and the powerful images recalled in the lessons and prayers accompanying the baptism. Even when the congregation is asperged immediately following the baptism, the appropriate teaching has not been done and as a result the people are not reminded of their own baptism. Sadly, when all this is the case, the most public use of water in a liturgical context does little to drive home the material and spiritual significance of God's gift of water.

*All creatures of our God and King,
lift up your voices, let us sing: Alleluia, alleluia! . . .
Swift flowing water, pure and clear,
make music for your Lord to hear, Alleluia, alleluia!*

So, what are we to do? As one way of rectifying the dearth of attention to water in our worship, we might sing and preach about Saint Francis's great hymn of creation. We might also draw on the Psalter, especially on those psalms that have significant references to water (Pss. 65, 93, 104, 107, and 124). We can select biblical lessons that have water at their heart: Jonah overtaken by a mighty storm as he seeks to avoid God's call to go to Nineveh; Jesus calming the wind and the waves; Saint Paul shipwrecked en route to Rome.[\[3\]](#) We can find or compose prayers that give God thanks and praise for water in its many forms. Above all, we can celebrate Baptism with careful attention paid to the powerful words and actions that constitute the rite. All these will provide much needed springs in the desert.

Most promising in this regard is the "Season of Creation" which is being increasingly embraced by Christians around the world. This optional season in the Church Year begins on September 1 (the Day of Creation in the Eastern Orthodox Church) and extends through four Sundays to October 4 (the Feast of Saint Francis). Each of these four Sundays in the three-year cycle is devoted to an element of God's

creation. Those Sundays that bear directly on water are the Fourth Sunday in Year A (River Sunday) and the First Sunday in Year C (Ocean Sunday).

Each Sunday in the Season of Creation is provided with lessons, prayers and hymns, and sermon material. Taken together, they allow for all that God has brought into being to be in our minds and on our lips as we worship. Humankind in all its diversity, the beauty of the physical world, and the magnitude of the universe beyond our sight— all are the subject of our prayer and praise.

The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Francis have called on Christians to pray and work for the protection of the earth and its peoples, all alike the work of God's hands. Like all else that God has made, the gift of water is to be celebrated, cherished and conserved. In that way we will give glory to God and help in realizing Jesus's words: "I have come that all may have life and have it in all its fullness" (John 10:10).

In conclusion here is the Prayer for the Day from the Australian liturgy for Ocean Sunday:

God our Creator,

as we reflect on the mysteries of the ocean depths,

we celebrate the wondrous design of the seas that surround us. Help us to discern how we have polluted our oceans

and to empathize with the groaning of creation beneath us.

Teach us to sense the presence of God in the tides and currents of the surging seas.

Teach us to care for the oceans and all our waterways.

In the name of the Wisdom of God,

the creative force that designs and governs all creation.

Amen.[\[4\]](#)



Jeffery Rowthorn came from Union Seminary to Yale in 1973 as one of the founding faculty members of the new Institute of Sacred Music. For the next fourteen years he taught liturgy and served as Yale Divinity School's first Chapel Minister. In 1987 he was elected Suffragan Bishop of Connecticut and then from 1994 to 2001 served as Bishop of the Episcopal congregations in Europe. Over the past forty years he has compiled and edited three hymnals and written hymns, among them the school hymn for Berkeley Divinity School and a hymn commissioned to mark the tercentenary of Yale University.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Cantic 8, The Song of Moses (*Cantemus Domino*) consists of selected verses from Exodus 15 (vv. 1-6, 11-13, 17-18).

[2] James Turrell, *Celebrating the Rites of Initiation* (New York: Church Publishing, 2013), p. 79.

[3] Jonah 1:1- 2:10; Matthew 8: 23-27; Acts 27: 13-44.

[4] The Season of Creation, First Sunday, Year C (Ocean Sunday)

Note: Under the leadership of Dr. Norman Habel, the Uniting Church of Australia developed the first "Season of Creation," providing a liturgy for each of the Sundays in the three-year cycle. The most recent liturgies for all the Sundays can be found at: [season of creation.com/worship-resources/liturgies](http://seasonofcreation.com/worship-resources/liturgies). A further resource is: *The Season of Creation: A Preaching Commentary*, edited by Norman C. Habel, David Rhoades and H. Paul Santmire (Fortress Press, 2011).

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