

# Bible Studies in Sustainability



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with some help from Chris Loader

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## Introduction

This series of studies looks at four themes based on what the ancient world saw as the four main elements of existence: earth, air, fire, and water.

Each session is a many-sided conversation,

- beginning with a passage from the Bible,
- then listening to other voices from the past,
- to our own living experience,
- and to what people are telling us today.

For each session there is written material designed to start the conversation, but you will bring your own experience and expertise to bear on the topics. You may want to take advantage of the rich imagery which each topic presents, to bring symbols into your group, engage in artwork, or do other creative things. Be careful if you dance a fire dance!

The best setting for talking through these studies is one where people agree to make it a safe place. That means: it's safe for me to express my opinion, to question the opinions of others, and to hold or change my view without feeling shamed or treated as stupid. It is often a good idea to agree at the beginning of your meeting that you want to be such a group and to check as you go on that it is a safe place. Being a safe place does not mean feeling you can't express an opinion or disagree. These topics need a lively exchange of ideas and experience. It also needs to be a safe enough place that those not used to saying much can speak up and find room to do so. The free talkers need to make sure they don't dominate proceedings. One way to introduce these issues is to have someone read this paragraph aloud and then have the group respond.

I have written these studies with some expertise in the area of biblical studies, but they call for much more information than I have, both scientific knowledge and on-the-ground "know-how" about ways to live sustainably. I thank my son, Chris, for helpful suggestions. At the end of each section there are some questions, *For More Discussion*. It assumes you will have already had some lively discussion. The suggestions become gradually fewer with each study because hopefully, your group will generate its own agenda. *The Sustainability Inventory* is for gathering practical suggestions for action: four sets of "Top Ten" ideas, for each of the four themes.

Why think about sustainability? We want to value what we have and we want future generations also to share it. We need each other to do so and we believe God cares about us, about all people, and about all creation, and we want to be part of that.

Don't forget to bring creation and creativity into your group: symbols, images, songs, poems, dances, plants, flowers, - don't leave creation behind!





### Getting Started

How will your group begin: with a symbol of earth? with an image? with a song? with your creation?

*God of earth, you are the ground of our being,  
our faith is deeply rooted in your goodness,  
nourish us with hope in this fragile world,  
that it may remain a good place to be for future generations and a place of peace  
and justice now.*

*Through Jesus Christ who calls us to renewal and love. Amen*

### Hearing an Ancient Story from the Bible

Reading: Genesis 1:20 – 2:7

### Reflecting on Their Story and Our Story

#### Part of Two Stories of Creation

This reading starts on the fifth day of one story of creation and ends near the beginning of a second story of creation. The Bible has two stories of creation, both very ancient and very like stories found in the surrounding cultures of its time. There we know them as myths of creation. Here in Genesis an author has used two of them, one which speaks of 7 days with humankind created last of all in God's image (1:1 – 2:4), and another which reverses the order and has humankind created first and then everything else (2:5-25). The author wasn't worried that on the surface they are contradictory, because he will have realised that each one was true in its own way. Most of the stories in the first eleven chapters of Genesis belong to the common stock of stories or myths shared by ancient people of the region. They are not science, but they are wisdom.

#### Earth and the Earthling

I have chosen this reading because of where it ends: God makes a human figure from the earth, breathes into it, and it comes to life (2:7). It is a playful story full of meaning, like a parable. The Hebrew word used to describe the earth or ground from which the human being was made is *adamah*. The creature God made is called in Hebrew, *adam*, which means something like: "earthling", not originally the name, "Adam". So the "earthling" is made from the "earth". Later we read that the "earthling" will die and return to "the earth", "the ground": "You are dust and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19). We are all "earthlings" and belong to the "earth".

#### "Mother Earth"

The ancient story in its own playful way is reminding us that we belong to the earth. The ancient wisdom of Australia similarly tells us that we belong to the land: the land is our mother. Many ancient cultures speak of "mother earth". We did not drop out of the sky. We don't walk around on earth as if we came from somewhere else. We are flesh and blood like the animals and grow and wilt like the plants. We have enormous advantages these days through scientific knowledge. It tells us that we have evolved over millions of years. We were not set beside animals and plants as a separate invention. We developed and emerged from creation. Most of our genome (the pattern that determines what we are) we share with other animals.

#### Belonging Together in the Community of All Living Things

We live in a wonderful and diverse world of creation, but not as strangers. We are connected. We don't just live with other beings. Some of them live inside us. Our mouths and our guts are home to many beings. Mostly we all get on pretty well. Unwelcome guests can upset us and we get sick trying to get rid of them. Sorting out who belongs where is important to keep things in balance. Some of them eat us, including the bugs inside of us that we need. And we eat them or, at least, other beings. Living is quite hazardous.

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### *Living at Others' Expense is Inescapable*

It might sound disastrous to say: to live you have to kill, but that's the way it is. We consume each other. Being vegetarian or vegan doesn't alter this. It just means we eat a more limited range of living things. This is also what goes on in our bodies: we grow partly by devouring our own cells. It all becomes a disaster when things get out of proportion: we need to set limits and people set them differently, including vegetarians and non-vegetarians. Ancient Australian wisdom teaches us: don't kill indiscriminately. You set limits according to need. You don't go about killing things just for fun. That puts things out of balance.

### *Greed and Injustice*

The issue becomes much bigger than balance when people take more resources than they need and others are reduced to poverty. Every day 22,000 people die of extreme poverty (living on less than a dollar a day). The causes are complex and the possibility of change is high. In the past three decades the number of people living in extreme poverty has gone down by about a third. But still greed and excess, taking more than we need, destroys the lives of others and threatens all life in the community of all living things.

### *Keeping Balance and Respecting Limits*

Keeping things in balance is about setting limits. The second creation story in Genesis leads into the story of Adam and Eve where God sets a limit and Adam and Eve don't keep to it. This is not a story about apples and certainly not meant to be a historical report of another Middle East incident! It is not history, but it is wisdom. It is like a parable of what happens when limits are not respected. The result is frequently disaster. When the story quaintly talks about this leading to thorns and thistles, pain in giving birth, and death, we know these things to be natural, but as a parable it alerts us to the dangers of not respecting limits. So not respecting limits is sin and brings harm to others, ourselves, and our world.

### *Healthcare for our Earth, not just Ourselves*

We are usually aware of limits relating to ourselves: overeating, drinking too much, not getting enough exercise, eating the wrong kind of food, not getting enough sleep, putting ourselves under too much stress. The ancient stories suggest that we need to think of everything as a whole, not just of ourselves. The experts of today are also telling us we need to start thinking outside of ourselves as individuals. Our health, the health of future generations and the health of the earth and the land are all tied up together. Creation is like one big body: its needs to be kept fit and healthy. Like our individual bodies, it can get sick.

### *Patterns of Caring for the Earth*

In ancient Israel they developed some basic laws about leaving land fallow every seven years and about similar sensible patterns of agriculture, which most cultures developed. With far more extensive knowledge we still need to do the same thing: care for the land and all its inhabitants, not just ourselves. Balance is getting things into right relationship with each other. The scriptures speak about this as rightness, righteousness, justice, goodness and about the opposite as sin. "Good news for the poor" was at the heart of Jesus' message of hope and his prayer: "Your kingdom come!" That has to include a vision of a healthy eco-system.

### *Taking Responsibility*

Our scripture passage began with the closing verses of the first creation story. That story keeps repeating the words, "And God saw that it was good". Creation is good. And it ends with God blessing humankind and saying: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (1:28). To "subdue" the earth never meant: destroy it! In its own simple way it meant: take responsibility and control, and look after it! This is also one of the ways we can understand being made in God's image: being made to be people who care about things, as God does.

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### *For More Discussion*

These are suggestions. You might not have time to discuss all of them. Choose the ones that interest your group, but make sure you leave a little time to allot the Sustainability Inventory tasks.

1. Consider these statements. Which ones do you agree or disagree with?
  - a. Nature has a way of looking after itself. We shouldn't get too worried about land, plants and animals. People matter most.
  - b. I know that what we're doing to the earth is endangering future generations, but there's precious little I can do about it. It's something for the United Nations and government.
  - c. I would like to explore whether there is anything I could do as an individual that would make a difference, starting in my own backyard: but where do I get that sort of information?
  - d. Life is short. Eternity awaits us. When death comes for us or Christ returns, we will be in a different world and a new creation. There is little point in trying to preserve the old one.
  - e. To live I have to be a killer of others in the community of all living things. How can I live with that? I'm sometimes scared I'll tread on an ant and then I think: that's somehow mad!
2. What does it mean to love the earth and to care for the land and to respect the community of all living things? What does it mean to look after creation in a way that it will be there for future generations of people but also of all living creatures?

You may have experiences you can share about what you have learned and what you might have changed to be a more caring citizen in the community of all living things. You may want to share how this all relates to your faith.
3. How is the health of the earth, the land and its creatures, in your community?
4. What can we do to change the pattern of greed which drives others to poverty, and how can the poor be enabled to access and develop their rightful share of the earth's resources?

### *Sustainability Inventory*

There are lots of practical suggestions about what people can do to contribute to sustainability. For each topical area, Earth, Air, Fire, Water, appoint a pair of people to assemble what they consider their "Top Ten" practical suggestions related to the topic, using the resources below or any other useful sources. They need to be suggestions which would be relevant for people in your group to implement. For next week, you'll need two sets, Earth and Air. Then one list each for the following two sessions, Fire and Water. Try to get just the idea down on paper, just a line or two. When your group meets you can explain what you mean in greater detail if necessary in the segment, "For More Discussion". Make enough copies of your "Top Ten" for each person in the group. Some suggestions might straddle across more than one area. Be very practical (e.g. Turn off the shower while you lather. Plant native shrubs.) As a general guide treat the categories as follows:

EARTH (soil, plants, living things, sharing earth's resources, food)

AIR (atmosphere, air, weather)

FIRE (energy, fuels, travel, alternatives)

WATER (its various uses, quality)

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## Resources

<http://www.greenhouse.gov.au/education/index.html>

<http://www.seasonofcreation.com>

<http://greenchurch.wa.uca.org.au>

<http://wacollaboration.org.au>

<http://www.acfonline.org.au>

<http://www.sedo.energy.wa.gov.au>

[http://www.garnautreview.org.au/domino/Web\\_Notes/Garnaut/garnautweb.nsf](http://www.garnautreview.org.au/domino/Web_Notes/Garnaut/garnautweb.nsf)

<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/carboncops>

<http://www.carbonneutral.org.au>

<http://www.ecofaith.org>

<http://www.actnow.wa.gov.au>

<http://www.foe.org.au>

[http://www.watercorporation.com.au/W/waterwise\\_index.cfm](http://www.watercorporation.com.au/W/waterwise_index.cfm)

<http://www.savewater.com.au/>

### *A Note about the "Top Ten"*

The idea of the "Top Ten" is not to make rules, but to make suggestions. People sustain their commitment to change if they are deeply convinced of the need to change. Setting up lots of rules to be kept can easily turn people off. This is an ancient piece of wisdom at the heart of our faith: right relations with God, ourselves, and others is what leads to the right kind of behaviour rather than trying to keep lots of commandments and rules.



EARTH



### Getting Started

How will you begin: with a symbol of air? with an image? with a song? with your creation (to share now or at discussion time)?

*God of the heavens, the vast unending universe,  
you are the air we breathe, the Spirit who blows hope and change into our lives,  
surround us with your vast unending love,  
that we may have courage to see danger and embrace change.  
Through Jesus Christ who fills us with the breath of your goodness. Amen*

### Hearing an Ancient Story from the Bible

Reading: Genesis 1:1-8; 2:7-8

### Reflecting on Their Story and Our Story

#### Earth and Sky

Our reading begins with the first creation story and then skips over to the second, the same passage we looked at in the last session. People of western Asia, from Persia to Palestine, told such stories. The people of Israel belonged to that cultural world. As we noted last session, these stories don't give us science, but they do give us wisdom.

#### Being Human: Earth and Air

According to the second creation story human beings are made from earth and air. God made figures from the earth and then breathed air into them. Those ancient peoples knew that people needed air. In their understanding the whole universe consisted of a flat or saucer-shaped earth sitting on water covered by a dome which also had water and lights (sun, moon, and stars) and air in between. Today we know that the earth is round, spinning in orbit around the sun, part of the galaxy of the Milky Way, one of millions of galaxies in a universe so large we cannot comprehend its vastness. In all of that, earth is but a speck and we are infinitesimally small. But we live on the speck, planet earth, and it is surrounded by an atmosphere of air which makes life possible here. We, too, know that we are not just earth, but earth and air, and without air we would not survive.

#### Being Human: not just Air or Soul or Spirit

Some people in the ancient world believed that human beings consisted of two substances, one, good, and the other, bad. They believed that the valuable part of us is our soul or spirit, which God breathed into us like air; but our bodies are just containers. Some even spoke of our bodies being like cages of the soul. Our true being is not material or earth, but spirit or air. Our true home is not earth, but heaven. Many went further and claimed that the earth is like a terrible prison, an ordeal through which we must pass, to find our true home above. For them creation was bad. The recently discovered Gospel of Judas was written by people holding these views in the second century after Christ. They even claimed that Jesus came to rescue us from this material world by giving us secret information about where we really belong and how we can escape. They also said that God the creator was not really the true God, because the true God would never create a material world.

#### Being Creation: not "Evil Material and Good Heavens"

Some people not only looked at themselves with a split assessment (soul is good, bodies are bad), but also looked at creation in the same way: the material world of creation is bad and only the heavenly world is good. If that's the case, who cares if we damage the material world! Another variation of this is when people say: why care about the material world when God is going to replace it all with a new creation, anyway? Some Christians holding this view have been among the world's worst polluters of the air and destroyers of the land. Much like the ancient Hebrews, we, today, do not disparage our bodies or our material world, but see ourselves as creatures who combine the physical and spiritual in one reality. We are not two parts, but one single whole. Our spirit or soul or mind is just one aspect of who we are. Heaven and earth, the heavens and the land, the air and the land and sea creatures, all belong to one reality and it is good.

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## *Making Hell on Earth*

People who came to view their bodies and the material world as evil mostly did so in the light of poverty and suffering. We can disapprove of their choices, but they remind us that for many people across the centuries human existence was dominated by pain, disease, and poverty. For some people that is still the case. Unless we care about bodies and the world in which we live, both have the potential to produce hell on earth, if not now, then certainly for future generations. The air, itself, will turn against us, and destructive winds, lash the stuffing out of liveable existence.

## *Breath, Wind, Spirit*

The first creation story tells us that each day God made something, God declared: it was good. Very early in that story we read of the wind or breath or spirit of God. In ancient Hebrew, as in Greek, people used one word to mean breath, wind, and spirit. In Hebrew it is *ruach*; in Greek, *pneuma*. English uses the Greek word in ways that still show this range of meaning: “pneumonia” has to do with breath; “pneumatic” drills have to do with air pressure. You may recall other words which come from *pneuma*. So in Gen 1:2 we read: “a wind (or “breath” or “spirit”) from God (or perhaps even: “a mighty wind”) swept over the face of the waters”. In that story air was important from the very beginning.

## *Symbols*

The wide range of meanings which the Hebrew word could convey made it possible to play with a wide range of meanings and symbols. When Luke celebrated the presence of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, he spoke of a mighty rushing wind (Acts 2:1-2) – like a new beginning creation. When the gospel according to John wanted to speak about Jesus and the Spirit, it spoke of the wind blowing and we do not know where it comes from and where it is going (John 3:8). The same gospel then has Jesus commission his disciples for their work by breathing on them and saying. “Receive the Spirit” (20:22) – another instance of new beginnings. We treat the Spirit as sacred, but also need to respect and care for the air.

## *Just “Talking about the Weather”?*

“When you don’t know what to say, just talk about something that doesn’t matter: like the weather!” These days talking about the weather has become something much more serious. We are releasing so much carbon dioxide and other gasses into the air that it is changing the earth’s climate. Like a body with breathing problems, the earth is having problems with its atmosphere. Under its changing air the world’s climate is warming, huge sheets of ice in the Arctic and Antarctic regions are melting. Sea levels are rising, dangerously high for those living in low lying regions which face the prospect of now being swamped by surges driven by storms. This situation is becoming worse at a faster rate than we imagined and this will spell disaster for future generations unless governments think long term and act decisively and we support only those that do.

## *Dangerous Air*

Closer to the surface of the earth, many cities have become regularly clouded with smog, visible and invisible, producing serious breathing problems and long term effects for inhabitants. In recent decades people have been recognising the dangers of inhaling bad air. Smoking is now discouraged, because of what it does to smokers and also to those around them. We are slowly realising that dirty air does us, our cities, and our planet, no good, if we want to survive in good health – as individuals, as human creatures, and as a habitable planet. In the ancient world of Jesus and the first Christians people believed the air was alive with spirits and demons, living between heaven, the dome of the universe, and the flat earth. Today we see the air very differently, but we have come to recognise that it is not just empty space. Like our breath, it is crucial for our existence and can be teeming with helpful and harmful things. Air isn’t empty; it is full. Clean and healthy air is essential for the whole community of beings. Unfortunately we cannot see carbon dioxide emissions. We can’t even see car exhaust these days. But ignorance of the invisible is killing us.

## *For More Discussion*

1. Have you some creation or creativity to share?
  2. Can you think of an experience where you have made “good air” or made air good? How does your life affect the air? How can you do less damage to the air?
  3. Look at the Sustainability Inventory “Top Ten” for EARTH
  4. Look at the Sustainability Inventory “Top Ten” for AIR
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### Getting Started

How will you begin: with a symbol of fire? with an image? with a song? with your creation (to share now or at discussion time)?

*God of light and warmth and fire, energising, refining, transforming,  
you bring light into the darkness we fear,  
you expose the great chasms of our folly,  
you reflect to us the hopes and fears of future generations,  
by the fire of your Spirit break open our closed hearts,  
release our seeds of creativity, free us from cold indifference.  
Through Jesus who shines on us and all generations. Amen*

### Hearing an Ancient Story from the Bible

Reading: Genesis 1:9-19

### Reflecting on Their Story and Our Story

#### Lights in an Ancient World

The first creation story belongs to another world. This could not be more evident than in what it says happened on the fourth of the seven days: God made the sun and the moon! Where did the other days come from? We need to respect this ancient tale for what it is. It belongs to a world where sun and moon were seen as lights up in the dome of the sky, along with the stars. We understand the world very differently, but they were giving expression to the view that the creation was good and that it had its own order, represented here symbolically by seven days. Mess with that order and you mess with life! In fact, in ancient Jewish culture as in many other cultures around the world, people looked at the sky believing that it reflected some order and set a pattern for human life. This was nowhere more obvious than in the seasons and was essential in knowing when to plant crops and when special festivals should take place.

#### Lights in Today's World

For us the sun is a light, but we know much more. It is a burning star which pulsates enormous energy out into our solar system, enough to burn us millions of kilometres away on planet earth. We swing around it, accompanied by our little moon, which reflects to us its own encounter with the sun's light, as it, in turn, swings around us, sometimes facing in both our direction and the sun's and giving us a full reflection, sometimes giving us a blank, or just a small arc, changing to a crescent, then half a ball, then three quarters. Then the whole cycle begins again, giving us a second rhythm for measuring time, beside night and day and the seasons, and gently pushing our oceans around.

#### More than Light: Fire!

Here is more than light. Already the ancients knew that warmth came also from fire close at hand. From the fires which kept caves warm and kept wild animals at bay among our primitive ancestors, to the communal fires of storytellers and mythmakers sometimes in temples and sacred precincts, forerunners of our biblical writers, people knew fire and plumbed its apparently magical qualities. Metal heated made ploughs and spears. Fire seemed like tapping the energy of creation itself, but equally able to turn all back to chaos. People harnessed fire to destroy and some saw it as the favoured instrument of divine threat, designed to frighten unbelievers into submission. Fire seemed to belong to the gods or to God because it was so often uncontrollable, jumping at times with a roar from the sky. Israel's God was no exception, dropping fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, and on worshippers of Baal, and Christians knew to follow suit, sometimes with awful images of burning lakes of eternal fire to inflict endless pain on dissenters.

#### Little Explosions

Our world has learned to live by little explosions caused by fire igniting fuel and driving engines, which power vehicles of all shapes and sizes. Harnessing the energy made by such explosions we have multiplied human mobility across the face of the earth and beyond. But all these little explosions together amount to hugely negative effects and will continue as long as we insist on lots of cars and roads and neglect public transport. We can mostly tame fire, going far beyond the metallurgy of the ancients, but we desperately need to tame our little explosions.

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Fire is still a miracle, transforming, unmaking and remaking reality, an enormous instrument for change and development. Every now and again it reasserts its uncontrollability and it still jumps from the sky in processes we now understand differently than the ancients. Fire remains terrifying and still threatens to turn us back to chaos.

### *Big Explosions*

While millions of tiny explosions drive us around, large ones threaten the survival of the human species, indeed all species. Nuclear weapons obliterate indiscriminately. The issue is, of course, much more than the explosion. It is the lasting contamination through radiation. Such dangers arise not just from bombs but also from reactor leaks and from nuclear waste not safely stored. Debate rages about whether the risks involved are so great that nuclear power should be abandoned altogether or whether they are manageable. The prospect of burning lakes of fire and flaming hell are no longer human fantasies about angry gods, but images of where human carelessness and arrogance could lead us. We hold our own judgement day in our hands and could drag down the innocent with us, people and the community of all living things. We have now in a true sense become our own worst enemy and potentially we can give away the future of generations to come.

### *Energy Needs*

Harnessing energy is a huge challenge. The aim should be to use sustainable sources of energy rather than being dependent on resources which will run out and not be available for future generations. For that is generational greed. Our grandchildren will also have energy needs. The aim should also be to use energy sources which do not result in more pollution and carbon in the atmosphere. Looking after fire cannot be separated from looking after air and looking after the earth. Each of us uses sources of energy. Oil will become a more scarce and expensive resource – now blatantly obvious. WA's dependence on gas has been exposed by the massive explosion earlier this year reducing supply by 30%. What are the resources of energy for the future? It is useful to do an inventory of what kind of energy sources we each currently use and how they measure up against the criteria of sustainability and cleanness.

### *Making Sense*

Perhaps the storytellers of the first creation account did not understand the key role of the sun. When they have three days pass and vegetation grow on earth on the third day before there is even a sun (which was created on the fourth), this makes little sense. The author who combined both creations stories might well have seen the differences between them. It is also quite possible that already then these writers knew they were not dealing with “ball-by-ball” descriptions of history, but with ways of telling truths by story and parable. Then it would not have mattered very much if not all the details made sense in a literal way. They make sense differently. They are not science, but they are wisdom, telling us that God is deeply connected with all things and calling us to respect and value the order and balance which makes enables it all to survive. In that order fire has its place and human beings need energy, but like fire out of control, a source of warmth easily becomes an agent of chaos and annihilation.

### *For More Discussion*

1. *Have you some creation or creativity to share?*
  2. *What are our sustainable sources of energy?*
  3. *What energy sources do you use? How have you or how could you change your energy use?*
  4. *Look at the Sustainability Inventory “Top Ten” for FIRE*
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### Getting Started

How will you begin: with a symbol of water? with an image? with a song? with your creation (to share now or at discussion time)?

*God of the raging seas, the mighty rivers, the silent springs,  
baptise us with your goodness,  
that we may be on the move from death to life,  
for our planet's future, for the community of all living things,  
for our lives and the lives of our children.  
Through Jesus who died and rose that we might be a people of life and hope.  
Amen.*

### Hearing an Ancient Story from the Bible

Reading: Genesis 1:6-10; 2:8-15

### Reflecting on Their Story and Our Story

#### *Water, Water, All Around*

In the first creation story, we do not begin with land, but with water. There is water all around. Only when some is taken up into the dome of the sky and the rest is pushed to the side does dry land appear. In the second creation story, water comes up from the ground to water it and in the special garden a river flows. We see traces of the second story's origins in the detail about the river branching into known rivers of Mesopotamia, modern day Iraq, including the Tigris and Euphrates. It is a tale about an ideal luxuriant garden and what then went wrong, when limits were overstepped.

#### *Water as Danger*

Water, like fire, can bring life and death. In the ancient world of the Hebrews it also represented mystery and the unknown. People drowned in the sea. The sea is vast and deep. People at the time of Jesus spoke of the sea as the abyss, the place of demons and uncontrollable powers. In the story of Jesus exorcising demons into pigs, the pigs stampede into the sea (Mark 5:1-20). Locals would recognise the symbolism of the tale. The stories of Jesus' stilling the storm or walking on the sea (Mark 4:35-41; 6:45-52) are rich in symbolism and celebrate the power he brings to overcome the threat of the unknown. The sea was so fearful for the writer of the Book of Revelation that he predicted a future when there would be no more sea! (21:1) The psalmists spoke of distress as like being overwhelmed by floods (69:2, 15; 93:3). The ancient myth of Noah and the flood and then the rainbow, reflect widespread understandings of what a catastrophe floods can bring.

It is not difficult to imagine how water got its negative image. You probably have your own negative experiences of water and it is not difficult to see them in today's world. What do you have to share?

#### *Water as Hope*

There are still thousands of communities desperately wanting a good water supply. Water is life – to us, to animals, to plants, to all. Death comes if we don't have water. Drought leaves lands parched and crops shrivelled. Climate change is affecting rainfall and water supplies. Water is a positive image in so many ways. The deep sea needn't be something terrifying. It can be awe inspiring, reminding us of depth and mystery. Water washes, renews, quenches thirst, and surrounds us still on all sides, as sea, rivers, rain and snow. Water becomes a rich symbol of life.

#### *Water and Baptism*

Paul interpreted the act of baptism as like being taken into death and then raised again to life (Rom 6:1-3).

The water represented death. For other interpreters the waters of baptism represented the catastrophe of divine judgement. Going through it in advance saved one from the real thing in the end. But baptism also washes and renews, or represents in its symbolism the life of God which renews and sustains us.

Ancient religions – and many still today – saw water as something sacred, so we find water before temples and shrines, and in Jewish and Christian imagination the future will be like a return to paradise, a garden with a river flowing through it and fruitful trees (Rev 22:1-5).

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### *Water and Earth*

The story of the Garden of Eden begins with the close connection between water and the land. The land does not want too much water and it does not want too little. It is a question of balance, made all the more complicated by the many differences between land and soil types. Population growth and climate change make water management a key issue of caring for our world, from the way you shower yourself to what you do with your garden and much more.

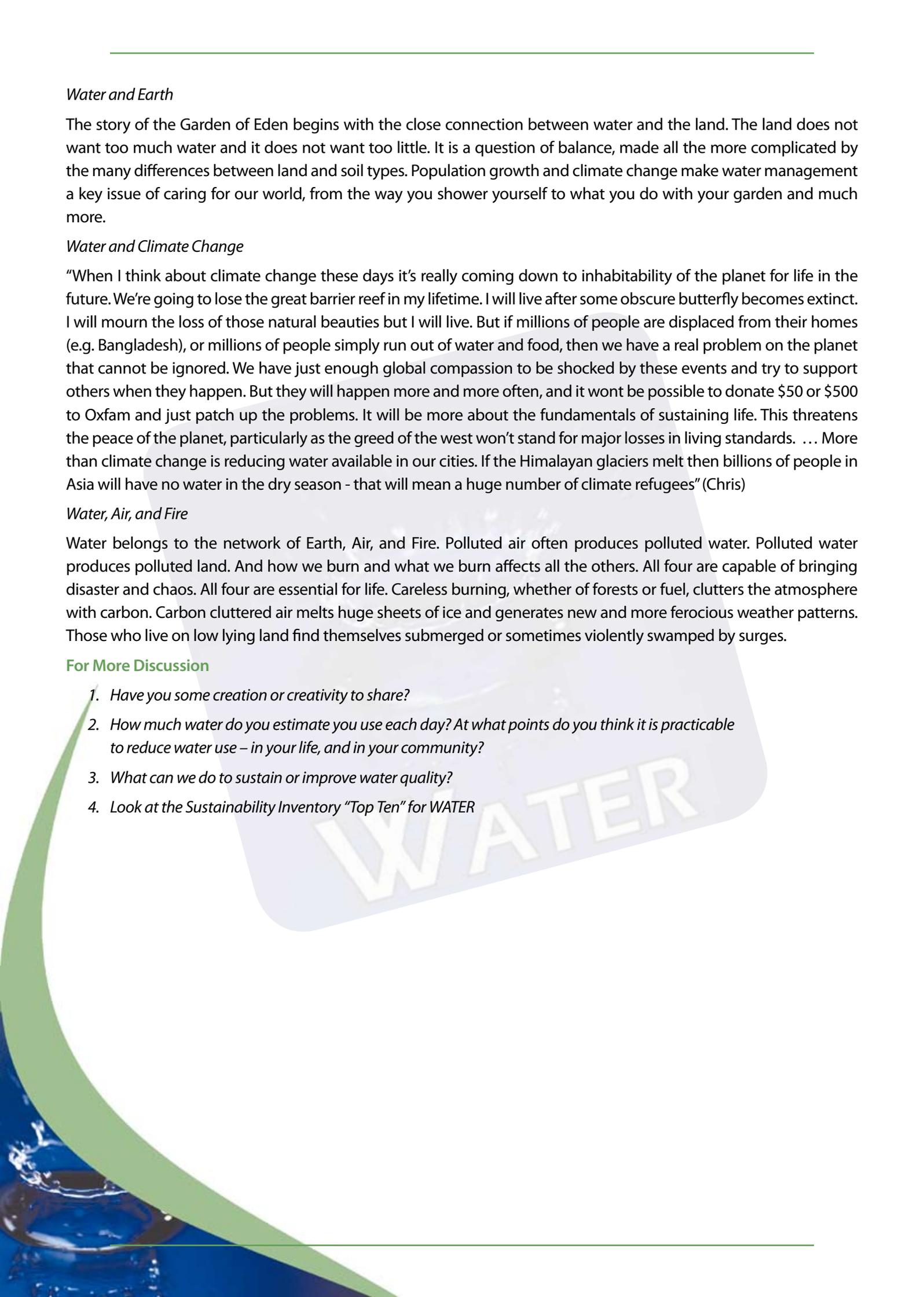
### *Water and Climate Change*

“When I think about climate change these days it’s really coming down to inhabitability of the planet for life in the future. We’re going to lose the great barrier reef in my lifetime. I will live after some obscure butterfly becomes extinct. I will mourn the loss of those natural beauties but I will live. But if millions of people are displaced from their homes (e.g. Bangladesh), or millions of people simply run out of water and food, then we have a real problem on the planet that cannot be ignored. We have just enough global compassion to be shocked by these events and try to support others when they happen. But they will happen more and more often, and it won’t be possible to donate \$50 or \$500 to Oxfam and just patch up the problems. It will be more about the fundamentals of sustaining life. This threatens the peace of the planet, particularly as the greed of the west won’t stand for major losses in living standards. ... More than climate change is reducing water available in our cities. If the Himalayan glaciers melt then billions of people in Asia will have no water in the dry season - that will mean a huge number of climate refugees” (Chris)

### *Water, Air, and Fire*

Water belongs to the network of Earth, Air, and Fire. Polluted air often produces polluted water. Polluted water produces polluted land. And how we burn and what we burn affects all the others. All four are capable of bringing disaster and chaos. All four are essential for life. Careless burning, whether of forests or fuel, clutters the atmosphere with carbon. Carbon cluttered air melts huge sheets of ice and generates new and more ferocious weather patterns. Those who live on low lying land find themselves submerged or sometimes violently swamped by surges.

### **For More Discussion**

1. *Have you some creation or creativity to share?*
  2. *How much water do you estimate you use each day? At what points do you think it is practicable to reduce water use – in your life, and in your community?*
  3. *What can we do to sustain or improve water quality?*
  4. *Look at the Sustainability Inventory “Top Ten” for WATER*
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## Prayers

### A Lament

Cars line up at the petrol pump,  
They inch along the freeway,  
To make the pilgrimage out of the city.  
Ipods beat out music as fingers tap the wheel.

**Forgive our feverish work without rest,  
Commitment to live without reflection  
And to love without prayer.**

The leisure boats race to leave the harbour,  
The wine is chilled, the canapés are ready,  
The weekend beckons, the high life so near,  
The economy booms and this gift our reward.

**Forgive us Lord, our sins of greed  
As we pursue the relentless call  
Of wealth, career and productivity at all costs.**

The plasma screen flashes its picture,  
Families are scattered in opulent space.  
Children share cyber connections  
And parents shut out their pain.

**Forgive us Lord, for filling our lives with the material,  
The food that doesn't satisfy  
And the breakdown of our relationships.**

We hurry home at night to our rest.  
Leaving behind those we don't want to see,  
The homeless, the hurting, the hungry,  
We shut our doors and switch on the tv.

**Forgive us Lord, for our unseeing eyes,  
Our cold hearts  
And the neglect of our neighbour.**

**Forgive us Lord, and grant us peace. Amen**

### A Prayer of Thanksgiving

The forest breathes again as arum lilies are sprayed.  
Marsupials re-appear as foxes decline,  
The groundswell of folk, who care enough to give away the keys to their car,  
These are the signs of a response to Your call.  
For those who work to protect the environment

#### We give you thanks

The climate change group meets to decide  
A plan of action and a way forward without despair.  
Community gardens with organic produce,  
Feed those who live without means and hope.  
For those who work to provide for others

#### We give you thanks



*continued overleaf*

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## Prayers (continued)

The church gathers strength as it lifts up those whose  
Island homes are sinking & gives them refuge.  
Volunteers travel to work in communities where conditions  
Appal and stun their senses.  
For those who work alongside those in need

### We give you thanks

The elders are gathered to hand down the stories  
Language flows as song lines vibrate  
Real work brings hope to the first people's nation  
Compassion is healing and Grace the response.  
For those who work to empower their people

### We give you thanks

## Prayer – a Chuckle with God

Bright polka dots on rubber boots reflect the sun's dance,  
As boots squelch through seaweed heaped around the winter vegies.

### God is in the vegie patch.

Little boots next to big boots, the grubby hand of the tiny child clasped  
around freshly picked broccoli  
Her upturned face full of delight  
As water shoots out from beneath the shiny algae.  
She chuckles, I chuckle and we wait to hear the echo of God's chuckle.

### God is in the vegie patch.

Carefully grown seeds from heirloom stock  
Keeping strains pure & sweet,  
Not the biggest, not the most perfect in colour and shape  
But the taste is from God – the giver of diversity.

### God is in the vegie patch.

The trellis is made from last year's prunings,  
Beans tenaciously inch their way to the top,  
Brightly coloured nasturtiums clumped around the base  
Earthworms are doing their job underneath  
And the rain gauge is filled with last night's cloud burst.

### God is in the vegie patch.

We munch on juicy, sweet, peas as we pull out the weeds,  
I ponder the lesson of nature in balance  
And reflect on the love of our nurturing God.  
The baskets we can fill to feed the 5000  
Start here in this simple home garden.

### God is in the vegie patch.

## Blessing

Lord of the pure stream, the ice floe, the unfurled orchid, the egret chick.  
Bless us that we might know our place in this Your world. May we be  
called to nurture, to protect and bring harmony to this troubled world.  
May we be inspired to resolve environmental dilemmas, face our future  
with confidence and celebrate Your will being done.

Amen

