

## ***Ocean Sunday Bible Study***

*Adapted from the Season of Creation Bible Study for Ocean Sunday by Norman Habel by Jessica Morthorpe and Steve Coster for Kippax Uniting Church.*

### **Introduction**

The Ocean – vast, deep, mysterious, and teeming with life. It is a source of life, livelihood, inspiration and peace for billions; covering three quarters of our planet and containing 80% of the total life on Earth. The ocean's vast and unexplored reaches make it our last chance to experience what the Bible's authors must have felt when they contemplated nature – the vastness, the untouchability, the uncharted, the challenge and the threat of God's creation.

The ocean seems invincible, and yet it is surprisingly fragile and increasingly harmed by the hands of man. A sink that is becoming the waste dump of the world and a depleted mine of resources. The ocean presents unique challenges because of its size, its status as a shared resource, and its ability to slip out of mind.

### **Reading and Discussion**

*Discuss: Are you a sea person? Do you have a sense of excitement when you plunge into the ocean? Or are the deep sea waters a fearsome sight? Are you fascinated by the millions of hidden species living deep in the ocean? Is the ocean an expression of infinity, the deep mystery of God's presence?*

### Going into Deep Water

Read Luke 5.1-11

Many of us like to think we have learned something of the art of fishing, whether in streams, lakes or the sea. Of course, modern boats have so-called fish finders that identify schools of fish below the boat and give those fishing a definite advantage. Simon Peter had no fish finder. He relied on knowing the 'way' of the fish, their feeding habits and their normal habitats.

After Jesus taught some people from Peter's boat, he suggested that Peter go fishing. Understandably Peter was surprised. After all, he had been fishing all night in his usual spots and there was nothing around. Jesus' request has a special catch: 'Put out into the deep water!'

The deep is the realm of mystery and wonder. The deep is what Job had been challenged to explore beneath the seas and in the world of the dead. The deep was the unknown. And it is precisely in that domain that the disciples catch a mass of fish. Jesus challenges them to move beyond their comfort zones, the known world and to explore the deep.

Peter's response is to fall at Jesus' knees and say: 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!'

How does Jesus respond? By giving Peter another challenge! He essentially tells Peter to stop feeling sorry for himself. Fish from the deep is the first challenge. There is an even bigger challenge; catching human beings with the new message I bring.

Just how massive and deep that message turns out to be is reflected in the epistle lesson of Ephesians 1.3-10. This Jesus is the Christ who not only brings his disciples face to face with the waters of the deep, but with the cosmic mysteries of redemption, forgiveness, wisdom and hope. For this Christ is destined to 'gather up' all things in the cosmos—the seas, the stars and the skies—and once again unite them according to God's plan.

### Jesus, Lord of the Oceans

Read Mark 4: 35-41 and Psalm 69:34

*Discuss: In the light of these texts, do you think Jesus has a special relationship with the sea? Does Christ come to heal our broken relationship with the seas as well as with God and each other? What voice might we hear from the ocean in response to Christ's coming?*

*Discuss: What does our faith tell us about how we should treat the ocean?*

*Discuss: What do you think we ought to do to raise awareness of the precarious state of our oceans? Is this more than a moral issue for you? What do you think the Church Christians can contribute to the conservation of our oceans and their creatures?*

### **Major Environmental Issues Affecting the Ocean**

*Split the eight topics below among your group and read the information provided. Discuss whether you were aware of these issues and how concerned you feel you should be about them.*

#### Overfishing

Overfishing refers to when more fish are caught than the system can naturally produce. Legends tell that the oceans were once so full of fish and other creatures that you could almost walk on them. We know this is no longer the case. In 1900 the ocean contained at least six times more fish than in 2009. It also takes 17 times as much effort to catch a ton of Northsea fish as it did then<sup>1</sup>. Unlike Jesus, who fed 5,000 with two fish, we have squandered this resource and threatened its survival. New technologies like the advent of fish finders have removed the respect of the hunter/fisherman and made it possible to wipe out entire species with ease. Entire populations of 150 year old Orange Roughy fish can be scooped up in a single night. As traditional target species are wiped out boats begin catching deeper sea species – many of which we know very little about.

*Action: [http://www.amcs.org.au/WhatWeDo.asp?active\\_page\\_id=167](http://www.amcs.org.au/WhatWeDo.asp?active_page_id=167)*

#### Bycatch

Bycatch refers to the capture and death of non-target marine animals during commercial fishing. It is the additional cost of the seafood we eat and is one of the principal threats to marine biodiversity worldwide<sup>2</sup>. Prawn trawling can catch up to 10-20kg of bycatch for every 1kg of prawns caught<sup>3</sup>. Bycatch is indiscriminate and can include even protected and critically endangered species like the Grey Nurse Shark. It is a very wasteful and unnecessary practice that would probably never have been allowed to exist on land, but in the ocean no one sees it occurring so it is seen as an acceptable cost.

*Action: Buy MSC Certified Seafood and campaign for action on bycatch reduction.*

#### Shark finning

Shark fins are a delicacy popular as a status symbol in many Asian countries. It is one of the cruellest practices perpetrated against any animal. Sharks are caught, their fins cut off while they are still alive, and released to drown or bleed to death. Everything but the fins (95% of the animal) is wasted as shark meat has comparatively low value compared to the fins and would take up valuable cargo space. Shark finning is largely unmanaged and unmonitored or illegal. These sharks come indiscriminately from all species and age groups and the practice

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<sup>1</sup> [http://overfishing.org/pages/images/overfishing\\_infographic\\_v1.1.png](http://overfishing.org/pages/images/overfishing_infographic_v1.1.png)

<sup>2</sup> <http://bycatch.org/>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.amcs.org.au/WhatWeDo.asp?active\\_page\\_id=392](http://www.amcs.org.au/WhatWeDo.asp?active_page_id=392)

threatens the stability of marine ecosystems where sharks are the apex predator<sup>4</sup>. It is estimated that more than 100 million sharks are killed for their fins annually, or about 270,000 every day, threatening many species with extinction. Shark numbers around the globe have declined by 90%<sup>5</sup>.

*Action: [http://www.amcs.org.au/WhatWeDo.asp?active\\_page\\_id=375](http://www.amcs.org.au/WhatWeDo.asp?active_page_id=375)*

### Ocean acidification

One of the reasons the impacts of our CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have been reduced so far is because the ocean absorbs about a third of the CO<sub>2</sub> emitted from burning fossil fuels. The cost of this is the acidification of the ocean. As CO<sub>2</sub> dissolves in seawater it produces carbonic acid, which reduces the pH of the seawater. Global ocean pH has dropped globally by about 0.1pH units since the industrial revolution. This is not alarming itself, but the rate of change is concerning. Ocean acidification has worrying potential impacts on marine organisms that rely on carbonates to form their shells, such as corals, calcareous phytoplankton and molluscs<sup>6</sup>.

*Action: Reduce your carbon footprint*

### Coral bleaching

Coral can bleach, or lose its colour, when it is stressed. A major cause of stress is increasing water temperatures. There were major bleaching events in the Great Barrier Reef's inshore waters in 1998 and 2002, creating concerns about the reef's health. Predicted temperature increases due to climate change are a major threat to the survival of coral reefs around the world<sup>7</sup>.

*Action: Campaign for erosion, carbon and pesticide use reduction in our farmlands*

### Sea level rise

Global average sea levels rose at the rate of 1.8 mm per year from 1961 to 2003. From 1993 to 2003 this rate increased to approximately 3.1 mm per year. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts that sea levels will continue to rise, and possibly accelerate as climate change continues. This is due to a combination of the thermal expansion of the oceans as temperatures rise, the melting of ice around the world and changes in water storage on land. Increasing sea levels will lead to increased coastal flooding and storm surges, increased coastal erosion and salinity of rivers, the loss of low-lying coastal communities and infrastructure, the loss of mangroves and wetlands and impacts on marine ecosystems such as coral reefs<sup>8</sup>.

*Action: Reduce your carbon footprint*

### Marine Pollution

Eighty percent of marine pollution comes from land-based activities. The majority of the waste we produce on land eventually ends up in the oceans – either deliberately or through run-off from rivers and drains. This includes sewage, oil, fertiliser runoff from farms, toxic chemicals (which accumulate in predatory species such as tuna and dolphins) and solid garbage (such as plastic bags, plastic six-pack rings for drink bottles and cigarette butts), which is often swallowed by marine animals<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Dr Baldwin, Douglas (2009) Sharkwater: A Teachers' Guide for Sharkwater (Secondary Schools)

[http://www.sharkwater.com/downloads/studyguide\\_secondarySchool.pdf](http://www.sharkwater.com/downloads/studyguide_secondarySchool.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.amcs.org.au/WhatWeDo.asp?active\\_page\\_id=166](http://www.amcs.org.au/WhatWeDo.asp?active_page_id=166)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ocean-acidification.net/FAQacidity.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.reef.crc.org.au/discover/coralreefs/bleaching/coralbleaching.html>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.ozcoasts.org.au/indicators/sea\\_level\\_rise.jsp](http://www.ozcoasts.org.au/indicators/sea_level_rise.jsp)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.panda.org/about\\_our\\_earth/blue\\_planet/problems/pollution/](http://www.panda.org/about_our_earth/blue_planet/problems/pollution/)

*Action: Use reusable bags for grocery shopping and don't litter. It is also recommended that you cut each circle in plastic six-pack rings for drink bottles before placing these items in the bin to prevent them strangling wildlife.*

### Marine Protected Areas

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) or Marine National Parks provide protection for marine habitats to enable the reproduction and protection of marine biodiversity. MPAs protect the breeding areas of commercial fish species and increase fish catches in the surrounding areas. They are also very valuable for education and research; and can be used in the conservation of threatened marine species such as dugongs, turtles and dolphins and the habitats they depend on. Scientists recommend the protection of at least 20-30% of each marine habitat to ensure the health and productivity of the ocean<sup>10</sup>.

*Action: [http://www.amcs.org.au/WhatWeDo.asp?active\\_page\\_id=679](http://www.amcs.org.au/WhatWeDo.asp?active_page_id=679)*

### **Call to action**

#### The Legend of the Starfish

“A vacationing businessman was walking along a beach when he saw a young boy. Along the shore were many starfish that had been washed up by the tide and were sure to die before the tide returned.

The boy walked slowly along the shore and occasionally reached down and tossed the beached starfish back into the ocean.

The businessman, hoping to teach the boy a little lesson in common sense, walked up to the boy and said, "I have been watching what you are doing, son. You have a good heart, and I know you mean well, but do you realize how many beaches there are around here and how many starfish are dying on every beach every day. Surely such an industrious and kind hearted boy such as yourself could find something better to do with your time. Do you really think that what you are doing is going to make a difference?"

The boy looked up at the man, and then he looked down at a starfish by his feet. He picked up the starfish, and as he gently tossed it back into the ocean, he said, "It makes a difference to that one”.”

<http://epistle.us/inspiration/starfish.html>

Creation invites us to reveal our nature as the Children of God by being the agents of God's redemption of creation. By caring for the oceans we show our love of God, its creator, and our obedience to God's will and ways. Jesus' teachings tell us we must start with ourselves and our own actions, knowing we can save the world if we change ourselves and let that influence others.

### **Closing Prayers**

Lord God Almighty, Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer of Heaven and Earth,

Thank you for the gift of Oceans.

Thank you for the way the vast breadth and depth of the Ocean reminds us of how wide and deep your love is for us.

Thank you that the power of the waves crashing against the seashore reminds us of your incredible strength, and that nothing can ever stand between us and that love.

Thank you Lord that you care for each and every one of us when we are like the starfish washed upon the seashore, needing you to save us.

Thank you for the remaining mystery and unknown areas of the oceans, our last frontier.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.amcs.org.au/WhatWeDo.asp?active\\_page\\_id=196](http://www.amcs.org.au/WhatWeDo.asp?active_page_id=196)

Thank you for using this mystery, this sense that we will never truly understand all the wonders of your creation, to remind us of your great mysteries that will always be beyond us. Thank you for the way you have made the oceans teem with life of every shape and size. Thank you for their incredible diversity and the way it reminds us of your power, care and attention to detail.

Lord, many years ago we began to realise that the land was not as vast and invincible to our impact as we thought. We began to notice the great scars we have put upon her surface. Now Lord we begin to see that the ocean too is harmed by our actions. Help us to do what we can, as your people, to speak for the oceans.

The oceans are voiceless because they are often far away and out of sight. Help us to be good neighbours to the voiceless and the vulnerable.

Thank you that even though everything we do may only be a drop in the ocean, the ocean would be less without that drop.

We commit to preserve life that your creatures might praise you.

Lord we join with the ocean and all its creatures to praise your Holy name and we lift up our voices and hearts in praise to you.

Amen

*Encourage reflection and prayer on today's study.*

### **Quotes for further reflection**

The greatest obstacle to discovering the shape of the earth, the continents and the ocean was not ignorance but the illusion of knowledge. ~ Daniel J. Boorstin

How inappropriate to call this planet Earth when it is quite clearly Ocean. ~ Arthur C. Clarke

I find myself at the extremity of a long beach. How gladly does the spirit leap forth, and suddenly enlarge its sense of being to the full extent of the broad, blue, sunny deep! A greeting and a homage to the Sea! I descend over its margin, and dip my hand into the wave that meets me, and bathe my brow. That far-resounding roar is the Ocean's voice of welcome. His salt breath brings a blessing along with it ~ Nathaniel Hawthorne

### **Additional Resources**

Australian Marine Conservation Society

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

Adopt-A-Shark

[http://www.nccnsw.org.au/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=blogcategory&id=66&Itemid=596](http://www.nccnsw.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=66&Itemid=596)

Bycatch Animation – a very good explanation of the concept

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0Zy1JSJ0jw>

Ocean Acidification

<http://www.ocean-acidification.net/FAQmain.html>

Overfishing

<http://overfishing.org>

Sharkwater website (shark finning and bycatch)

<http://www.sharkwater.com/>

Ocean Pollution

[http://current.com/tags/86561651\\_ocean-pollution/](http://current.com/tags/86561651_ocean-pollution/)

Ocean Conservation

<http://www.thankyouocean.org/>

Article on fish scarcity by Catholic priest Sean McDonagh

<http://www.catholicireland.net/evangelisation/environmental-theology/583-fish-are-becoming-scarce>

A Theology of Fly Fishing

[http://people.bu.edu/wildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/theo1/projects/2001\\_olmstead/index.htm](http://people.bu.edu/wildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/theo1/projects/2001_olmstead/index.htm)