

Viriditas (Revelation 22: 1-5)

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Over these past four weeks, we've been celebrating the Season of Creation – listening to the voice of earth as a voice of God in trees, land, wilderness and rivers. As you know, this season is a fairly recent addition to the liturgical calendar, and a criticism of our tradition is that rather than contributing to right relationship with creation, Christianity has fostered a degree of distance, even hostility to the natural world. There's been a tendency, exacerbated in the early modern period, to class matter as distinct from and inferior to spirit, with the result that the material world was treated as little more than a set of resources to be used for our ends. Spiritually speaking the real action was assumed to be in the relationship between human beings and God, who was 'up' and 'away' in heaven.

Well, theologically speaking we're in the process of recovering from this dualistic vision – and once you start to read Scripture with your ecological consciousness raised, it seems clear there's no proper warrant in our tradition for this kind of split between matter and spirit, heaven and earth. The story of God with us begins with creation and ends with creation renewed. The reconciliation of humanity with God and the regeneration of all life on earth are part of the same unfolding, the same salvation.

An early expression of this is found in the story of Noah, a righteous man who was called by God at a time of rising sea levels to build an ark by means of which not only he and his family, but breeding pairs of all the animals could survive the coming deluge (Gen. 6: 18-19). When giving Noah his instructions, God insists that 'of every kind of living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark to keep them alive with you; ... Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive' (Gen. 6: 19-20). As Rowan

Williams has pointed out, this story is ‘clearly about how the saving of the human future is inseparable from securing a future for all living things ... Noah is made responsible for the continuation of what we would call an ecosystem’.¹ This suggests that: ‘We do justice to what we are as human beings when we seek to do justice to the diversity of life around us; we become what we are supposed to be when we assume our responsibility for life continuing on earth’.²

This same concern is evident in the story of Jonah. You might remember that by the end of his part in the narrative, this reluctant prophet seems to have some inner work still to do – he’s angry and depressed because God has decided not to smite the Ninevites after all, and the book of Jonah closes with him enjoying a good sulk. But God is clear that saving Nineveh matters, and not only because he has compassion on its human inhabitants. He chides Jonah: ‘should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’ (4:11).

‘The biblical vision’, concludes Williams, ‘does not present us with a humanity isolated from the processes of life overall in the cosmos, a humanity whose existence is of a different moral and symbolic order from everything else’. Insofar as human beings are given a distinctive place, it’s to do with ‘the gift to human beings of conscious, intelligent responsibility for the life [we] share with the wider processes of the world’.³ This gift, we might say, constitutes our vocation to participate in God’s care for the whole, to be joined in life’s healing and renewal.

In our time, this is a daunting vocation. You’ll have heard our contemporary environmental crisis described as a ‘wicked problem’. A consequence of our blindness to life’s inter-connectedness and our refusal of right relationship over the past three centuries is that almost everything about the way we live now in the industrial West has destructive implications for the world. And it’s not possible *simply* to untangle ourselves. This is true for us as individuals, where the weekly

¹ Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p.197.

² Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, p.203.

³ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, pp.205-206.

grocery shop becomes increasingly fraught the more we learn about plastics and their pollution of the ocean, about the carbon footprint of industrial agriculture and food miles, not to mention issues of land degradation, exploitative labour practices and so on. Intractable entanglement dogs us also as a society, as the stalemate over questions to do with energy, transport and many other policies suggest. The ‘wickedness’ of these problems is, of course, no excuse for inaction – but for us really to heed the call, as Noah did, ‘to do justice to the diversity of life around us’ will be the work of our life-times and beyond, requiring radical conversion of our whole way of life.

But here’s the thing – and this, it seems to me is part of what we celebrate with the coming of spring. We’re not in this on our own; the world’s healing is not reliant solely on our energies. I’ve focused so far on what the biblical vision implies for our responsibility of ‘for life continuing on earth’, but this responsibility is always a response to who God is and what God is doing. While it’s true that we must turn, we must change our behavior and transform our relationship to earth, the biblical vision also insists that creation is ever oriented towards its healing and fulfilment. It is ‘waiting with eager longing’ and ‘groaning in labour pains’, St Paul says (Rom. 8:19, 22). It wills *to be* renewed, given half a chance.

And this brings us to the concept of ‘viriditas’ or ‘greening’ – a concept central the theology of the 12th century monastic, musician and physician – Hildegard of Bingen. By ‘viriditas’, Hildegard meant something like the aliveness of life, the unquenchable energy of life’s creation and renewal. For her, this energy is immanent in all life – in nature and in human beings. Here are some of her usages: ‘The world in the height of the spring season’, she says, ‘is filled with viriditas’; God breathed the breath of viriditas into the first human beings; even the smallest twig on the most insignificant tree is animated with viriditas. In the spiritual realm, one who is filled with weariness is said to be lacking viriditas, and Hildegard characterises a saint as one who is “the viriditas of the finger of God”⁴. Viriditas seems to name the same

⁴ ‘Introduction’, Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Vols. 1-III, trans. Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.7.

quality of aliveness that poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called the 'dearest freshness deep down things'. For Hildegard as for Hopkins, this aliveness of things is the Holy Spirit.

An important implication of this, I think, is that when we work for the healing of the world, when we seek to participate in life's care, renewal and regeneration, then we are working with the grain of life. We are aligned with the greening, quickening power that is immanent in created reality, and we're joining ourselves to what Hildegard calls its 'force'.

I'm conscious of dangers in this line of thought. In no way do I want to encourage complacency, the delusion of some divine guarantee that, whatever we do to the world, it will all work out in the end. Williams says that because created life 'reflects in varying degrees the eternal life of God [viriditas], we have to say, as believers, that the possibility of life is never exhausted within creation: there is always a future'. But, he cautions sharply, 'in this particular context, this specific planet, that future depends in significant ways on our co-operative, imaginative labour, on the actions of each of us'.⁵ I believe this to be true. Even so, I wonder if our commitment to this labour might be strengthened by our awareness, our *faith*, that as we seek to be *for* life's healing and reconnection, we are met by an answering responsiveness that has its own energy and power, like the gentle but unstoppable insistence of leaves breaking forth in springtime.

The book of Revelation puts before us a vision of creation renewed, where flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb is the river of the water of life, and on its banks the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. This is a renewal made possible by the fact that Jesus has entered into the depths of our alienation to undo it from within and been raised to new life in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our generation is called to face up to the destructive enormity of humanity's alienation from creation, and to assume our responsibility for life continuing on earth. Let us commit ourselves to this call, as Jesus did, in the power of the Holy Spirit – the immanent life of God, the *viriditas* even now making green our land.

⁵ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, p.206.