

Everywhere is a Place: Hearing the Voice of Land (Gen. 2: 4b-9)

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‘The only way that we can translate into English how we see our relationship with the Land is with the words “hold”, and “connect”. The roots of the country and its people are twined together. We are part of the Land. The Land *is* us, and we are the Land’.¹ These are the words of Margaret Kemarre or ‘MK’ Turner, an Akarre woman, born in the region of Harts Range, north-east of Alice Springs. MK is one of the indigenous teachers Neil and I have been privileged to spend time with in our last couple of trips to central Australia. Her words echo those of the creation story told in Genesis 2, in which the first human being is formed from the dust of the ground – he too ‘is part of the land – the land is him, and he is the land’. But, culturally, we Westerners struggle to have a live sense of this originary belonging.

Tonight we continue to celebrate the liturgical *Season of Creation* – a season in which (as Neil said last week) we’re called to recognize our interdependence with the rest of the created order, to give thanks for its gifts and confess our crimes of neglect and exploitation. It’s a season when we’re invited to hear the voice of earth as a voice of God, and this week we focus on the voice of Land.

It’s often been said by environmentalists that the biblical scriptures are a mixed ecological resource. On the one hand, there are texts – like our Genesis passage – that point to a sense of the ‘inter-being’ of humanity and the earth. In the psalms and the prophets too, land is seen as a subject in its own right, able to rejoice and praise God, and able also to cry out at injustice and spoliation. And in the Law, God commands human beings to care for the well-being of the land, just as for family and neighbours. Every seventh year, there was to be a sabbath for the land, for as the Lord instructed Moses, ‘Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall

¹ Margaret Kemarre Turner, *Iwenhe Tyerrtye* – what it means to be an Aboriginal person (Alice Springs: IAD Press, 2010), p.15.

prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for the land, a Sabbath for the Lord' (Lev. 25: 2-4).

And yet, there is also a persistent biblical theme of land as possession. Rather than a speaking subject in the web of relationship, it's a thing to be seized and used at will. God is portrayed as promising to give Abraham and his 'seed' the land belonging to the Canaanites, and God's leading of Israel to 'take possession' of this land by dispossessing the tribes of the Jebusites, Perizzites, Hittites and Amorites is just about *the* major theme of the Torah.

There *are* hints that Israel's possession of this land was not to be understood as ownership. In the book of Leviticus, God says 'The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants' (25: 23). But the very fact that it's to be taken *from* the other peoples seems to entail or at least license the view that this land now belongs to Israel. And quite apart from how problematic this is in terms of inter-human justice, there's a long-term consequence for ecological consciousness too. Because if land can be alienated from other human beings, something 'I' can 'possess' or 'own' instead of you – then it's unsurprising that eventually we become alienated from the land itself. It belongs to me, not me to it.

But we know this is a kind of lie. We are not creators of earth but created by it, all of us recipients of gift. And our life and well-being, and the life and well-being of the world *are* interdependent. *The earth* needs us to remember this before we kill more living soils with excessive chemicals, turn more paddocks into salt plains and smother yet more open ground unnecessarily with concrete; and *we* need to remember it for our embodied souls to be healed. The disciples asked Jesus when he would 'restore Israel' – land as possession again – but Jesus is concerned to restore all of us to a much larger belonging as fellow creatures participating in the gift of life: 'Consider the ravens' – he says: 'they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them' (Luke 12: 24). Why then are you obsessed about what you possess?

This belonging as participants in the web of life is something that Aboriginal Australians have never forgotten – and this is part of their great gift to our nation. Indigenous relationship to Land has never become alienated as our culture’s has. Here’s MK Turner again: ‘our Land is as sacred as yourself, as a person like you are. And always, you treat the Land good, the Land treats you the same’. The Land, she says, will show you if you don’t know which way to go: ‘the Land just like tells you. “Oh yeah! This is the way to that place” ... we can talk to the Land and who we are, and the Land’ll always relate. The Land and people are the same. Same’.²

This is a level of consciousness that those of us not formed in Aboriginal culture may never realise in anything like the same way. But it points to a possibility that seems incredibly enriching and that I believe we can learn from. MK’s words are not just about stewardship and prudent care; they’re about friendship, mutuality – they’re about seeing the land as family. She says: ‘When I talk about Land, as we see it in the eyes of us – our group, all my families – we see it because that Land is really part of us’. There’s an Arrernte phrase ‘*apmere apanpe*’ which she translates in a beautiful and striking way as meaning, ‘a place everywhere’ or ‘everywhere is a place’. That is, there is no land that’s not part of relationship, no space without a story – ‘everywhere is a place’. And when you know the land in this way, she says ‘even though it might be destroyed by another species, we see how the beautiness is still in the country ... It doesn’t matter that horses and bullocks have caused such destruction, we still see the spirit of that Land glistening’.³

I find a huge gift in this phrase, ‘everywhere is a place’. It seems to me that we see some bits of land as places – places we’re in relationship with, places that are part of our story. And, like Aboriginal people, we can be wounded or feel profoundly dis-located when Land significant to us is hurt or destroyed. I think of my childhood home and garden, and how I’d hate for it to become a ‘knock down, rebuild’. Mum’s family is from the wheat belt in Western Australia, and Mum and my aunts who still live there have been hugely distressed in recent years by the mass clearing of trees

² MK Turner, *Iwenhe Tyerrtye*, p.115.

³ MK Turner, *Iwenhe Tyerrtye*, p.126.

to make life easier for GPS driven tractors and massive agribusiness. They feel it as a desecration of their Land, their place. Perhaps some of you have suffered this kind of distress – as gullies where you played as a child become highways, fields become shopping malls, and places where you picnicked are covered in litter.

But what if we saw not just these particular locations but everywhere as ‘a place’, everywhere as being in relationship and having a story – just as every person is in relationship and has a story? MK says: ‘the Land’s gotta have people to talk on its behalf ... it’s just like a living thing when we talk for it’. And this means that even if the Land is not ‘your’ Land, not Land to which you have a particular connection or responsibility, you cannot disrespect it, just as you would not disrespect another person, even if she is not *your* mother, *your* child. According to MK, ‘If someone rubbishes Land, even people who are not connected with that Land can feel it ... If people talk rubbish-way to Land, the Land can feel it and gets very hurt’. So, she says, ‘it’s very important to respect the Land’s sacredness. Never to treat it with disrespect, even by talking’.⁴

To glimpse this possibility of friendship with Land – as a subject whose feelings can be hurt, whose story can be silenced or revered – this changes us, I think. For me, it feels a profound enrichment as well as a call to deepened attention and relatedness. It makes me think afresh not only of the beautiful Land around Canberra, but of what I deem ugly tracts of Land as well – I think of the industrial zone at Mitchell, which I relate to as an eyesore, and something to get through quickly. What if I were to see this Land too as a place, with feelings, a story and something to say? Last week, Neil mentioned the practice of *dadirri* – as taught by Daly river elder, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr. It’s a practice of listening and quiet still awareness, which leads to a profound experience of appreciation and renewed connection. What’s so important about this practice is that it shifts our commitment to creation from conceptual to experiential, from something in our heads alone to something deep in our hearts. This is the great conversion called for in our time.

⁴ MK Turner, *Iwenhe Tyerrtye*, p.117.

So as we continue our journey through this Season of Creation, I invite you again this week to be more conscious of the Land in which you live and move and have your being – from the particular and beloved places of our homes and gardens, to the grounds of our schools and offices, to the whole living Land around us, ‘our sister Mother Earth, who feeds us and rules us, and produces various fruits with coloured flowers and herbs’ (as St Francis says), from whose dust we are formed and whose voice – if we listen closely – we may hear.