

6 October 2012

Belonging to the Web – Luke 12. 22-34

Sarah Bachelard

Tonight we come to the last week of our Benedictus Season of Creation, and it's fitting that we do this in the company of St Francis – who preached God's love to animals and who understood himself to be profoundly related to the web of life. In his famous Canticle of the Sun, he offers not only his own praise to God but speaks the praises of his Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Brothers Wind and Air, Sister Water and Mother Earth. He offers the praise of the whole Creation, from his place within it, a creature among the family of creatures, one who speaks as a brother for those without words.

It can be easy to sentimentalize Francis – preaching to the birds, perpetually full of the joys of spring. But there is something much deeper going on – something I think that can offer us resources we need for a profoundly different relationship with our world.

Francis grew up the son of a wealthy merchant, a soldier and a man about town. His conversion from this way of life happened gradually, over a few years, and it culminated symbolically when he stripped himself naked in the public square of his home town, taking off his rich robes (much to his father's consternation), embracing a life of radical poverty and humility.

With this gesture, Francis was saying 'yes' to the creaturely condition of absolute dependence on God. His embrace of poverty was his enacting of radical trust in God's love and provision for him and the whole created world. It was an imitation of the trust, the refusal of self-protection, that Jesus displayed in becoming human, when (as the

hymn of praise in Philippians puts it) rather than regarding 'equality with God as something to be exploited' he 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness' (Phil.2.6-7). It's the same trust that Jesus is teaching his disciples in our reading from Luke: 'do not be afraid, little flock', do not worry, for God knows what you need.

Francis was also saying 'yes' to a profound solidarity with all that is created, all that exists. Nakedness means that you can't be better than anyone else. Famously, a key moment in his conversion was his embracing of a leper – one despised and outcast and profoundly to be feared. And on his deathbed, he instructed that when he died he was to be stripped naked once again and lain flat out upon the earth – embracing Sister 'bodily death' (as his Canticle puts it), at one with the earth from whence he came.

So Francis's at-oneness with creation is not sentimental – it is the most profound acceptance of his own vulnerability and dependence, his embrace of solidarity with all. The way to such belonging *is* the way of stripping, the way of poverty. What kind of poverty? It does involve material poverty – letting go of goods, possessions; but also and necessarily, it involves poverty of spirit – letting go the means by which we shut ourselves off from belonging to God and others, the means by which we seek to protect ourselves – thinking we are better than others or trying to be, clinging to ambition or anxiety, striving and worrying. It involves receiving our lives as gift from God, rather than trying desperately to make them or possess them on our own terms.

The overarching context for our Season of Creation has been the ecological crisis we face today – our knowledge of the ways in which our collective refusal of poverty (both material and spiritual), our lack of solidarity, is destroying other creatures, habitats, rivers and seas, whole eco-systems. If we are to heal the wounds of our world, we will need to draw on all kinds of expertise – scientific, political, legal, economic – there will need to be alternative energy technologies, legal frameworks and new kinds

of market. At bottom, though, the source of our crisis is spiritual – it lies in humanity’s profound alienation from our own creatureliness, our fear of death and vulnerability, our desperate attempt to make ourselves safe by means of possessions, or prestige, or self-defence.

How does that realisation help us? What chance is there that the forces of global capitalism will suddenly take St Francis as their model? At one level, it’s true, the chances of mass conversion seem slim. But the economy of the Spirit works in a non-linear way. The mystery of the Incarnation is, in part, that God enters the world in a particular place and time, is born as a particular human being, and from that singular life of obedience and love, flows a new creation, healing and grace. In the sacraments, the Eucharist, the bread and wine at this table, the things of earth are mysteriously filled with God and change each of us from within. And so, I believe, in the offering of *our* lives to be transformed, through prayer, through offering our consciousness to God, something happens that makes a difference in the world around us. This is a matter of faith and hope – not often of sight – it is trust that making space for the silent working in and through us of the Spirit of God, who draws us into solidarity, who leads us to accept our own creatureliness and poverty, who enables us to let go of what blocks our belonging to the world, is part of what will heal our world.

So, as we conclude this series of reflections, I invite you now consciously to bring your attention to this work of being a creature, being in solidarity, loving what is and letting go of what is in the way of that.

- Look with loving attention at your flower/bark ... What do you see? What do you see now, that you didn’t notice at first?
- Smell it ...
- Close your eyes, and touch it gently ... what does it feel like against your skin?

- Now take your attention wider ... to the sounds in the room and beyond ... what do you hear ...
- Be conscious of your own body ... sensations; be conscious of being your body, being at home in your body ..., the touch of your clothes...
- Be conscious of thoughts that you have, particularly any persistent anxieties or worries, things that you are afraid of, things you think you must strive after or keep hold of ... Can you take them off, like garments you don't need? Can you let yourself be without them?
- In this open and tender place, can you feel yourself in the world, at home here, belonging here?
- In this open and tender place, can you stand with some part of the suffering world, can you embrace it in the Spirit and enfold it in love?