

26 September 2015

Viriditas (Song of Solomon 2. 10-13)

Sarah Bachelard

Our tradition images human life as a kind of world, a *microcosm*. We traverse, so we say, inner deserts and fall into abysses, we come to springs of living water, we enter dark woods and ascend the heights, we winter through difficult times and rise at day-break to newness of life. Metaphors of times and seasons, of place and absence of place are pervasive in our self-understanding and our relationship with God. It's impossible really, to imagine describing our lives without making use of this kind of imagery. We are creatures of the earth. We know ourselves through our relationship to the earth. We know God in the same way. As the psalmist says: 'The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge' (Ps 19. 1-2).

Today we savour the coming of Spring. And I wonder what new possibilities for self-understanding and for deepening our life with God are suggested by the *metaphor* of this season and by our *experience* of Spring this year?

A theologian for whom the metaphor of Spring was utterly pervasive was the 11th century musician, physician and abbess – Hildegard of Bingen. Her key theological concept was the notion of '*viriditas*', 'greenness'. Described as the 'despair of translators', in Hildegard's usage *viriditas* is 'a profound, immense, dynamically energised term'. It's how she tried to name the aliveness of life and so it pertains to and connects all life – personal and cosmic, physical and spiritual. According to Hildegard, 'The world in the height of the spring season is filled with *viriditas*, God breathed the breath of *viriditas* into the inhabitants of the garden of Eden, even the smallest twig on the most insignificant tree is animated with *viriditas* ... and (in the spiritual realm) one who is filled with weariness is said to be lacking

viriditas. Hildegard even speaks of a saint as “the *viriditas* of the finger of God”¹. It’s a beautiful notion; it seems to celebrate the same quality of aliveness that poet Gerard Manley Hopkins described as the ‘dearest freshness deep down things’.

For Hildegard as for Hopkins, the source of this aliveness of things is the Spirit of God. Life’s generation, sustaining, and renewal is not simply automatic, natural, cyclical. It’s actually gift – grace. This means that in human life, our *viriditas* is connected to our relationship with God; and, for Hildegard, that means that the vocation of both physician and priest may be imaged in terms of gardening. Each is called to tend the greenness, the *viriditas*, of our bodies and souls, not letting them fall into aridity through lack of moisture, imbalance of humours, or turning away from the sun which is the grace of God.

So – here’s one set of metaphors derived from the season of Spring which offers resources for understanding ourselves in relation to God. They focus on the energising of life by the Spirit of God, on the call to tend, cultivate and celebrate what is given. As the Song of Solomon has it: ‘the flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come’.

There are other images of Spring, other ways of exploring this season as a metaphor for experience. Parker Palmer speaks of the muddiness of springtime in his native Wisconsin – how the melting of snow and emergence of new life in that part of the world is actually a fairly messy, unbeautiful time. T.S. Eliot called April, in England, the ‘cruellest month’ because it mixes:

Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter [he says] kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.²

¹ ‘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.

² From ‘The Wasteland’.

In other words – sometimes coming to life again feels more painful than staying numb, buried under ‘forgetful snow’ and aspiring to no more than survival, eking out ‘a little life with dried tubers’.

Yet conversely – it’s just this refusal of plants to stay buried under snow, just this insistence that life will come again in its fullness, which makes Spring such a potent theological metaphor. Writing to his people on the brink of destruction and exile and the collapse of David’s kingdom, the prophet Isaiah proclaims: ‘A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots’ (Isaiah 11. 1-2). Spring-time imagery is pervasive in the church’s understanding of resurrection. Martin Luther remarked that: ‘Our Lord has written the promise of resurrection, not in books alone, but in every leaf in springtime’. New life from nothing; green shoots from seemingly dead branches.

So how is it for you? How does Spring speak to you of God, of yourself, of your present experience? What resources does it offer?

For me, a significant dimension of Spring is the paradox of its tenderness and fragility alongside its insistence and unstoppable. At the beginning it’s barely there. I think of the willows by Aspen Island and how they start to glow a warm, light tan colour – before even the hint of greening. I think of those fleeting moments of softened air which unexpectedly brush the skin before another Antarctic blast blows in, when just a whiff of fragrance breaks through. I think of the buds beginning so slowly to swell and pinken – so you wonder whether you’ve seen it or not. Sometimes Spring’s coming seems too fragile, too gentle to turn the tide of entrenched cold and leaflessness. Yet on it comes ... growing stronger, actually inexorable, sap rising, days lengthening, leaf opening.

I said earlier that metaphors of times and seasons are pervasive in our self-understanding and how we express our relationship with God. The Scriptures make use of them all the time and we must too. Different metaphors illumine different facets of our experience, offer different resources for our journey. The metaphors of springtime are some of the richest that we have. They speak of the sometimes difficult transition from winter and bareness; of the mess, fragility and risk this transition so often involves. They speak of the experience of fertility as gift – something from nothing – of hope that comes from the future, and the gentle but unstoppable energy of life’s greening and renewal. They speak of the connection of all this with faith in creation and the Creator. Tonight we celebrate the gift of this season and the gift of its metaphors and with Michael Leunig we pray:

Dear God,

We celebrate spring’s returning and the rejuvenation of the natural world. Let us be moved by this vast and gentle insistence that goodness shall return, that warmth and life shall succeed, and help us to understand our place within this miracle. Let us see that as a bird now builds its nest, bravely, with bits and pieces, so we must build human faith. It is our simple duty; it is the highest art; it is our natural and vital role within the miracle of spring: the creation of faith.

Amen.³

³ Michael Leunig, *When I Talk to You* (Sydney: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2004).