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Heart Sick (Jeremiah 8: 18 – 9:1)

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There's something deeply strange about our country's, our culture's relationship to the environmental crisis. Increasingly, the nature of our situation is in plain view – where once the notion of 'climate change' was confined to abstruse modelling in scientific papers, it's now common parlance; and where once its outworkings were imagined as affecting some distant future, it's now almost daily that we hear of so-called 'unprecedented' events – fires in Queensland rainforests and the Amazon, catastrophic hurricanes in the Caribbean, soaring temperatures in the Arctic, existential risk to Pacific Islands, the drying up of our rivers and the irreversible bleaching of our coral. And yet – even now – our leaders, our systems, even our personal ways of life struggle to engage meaningfully with this reality. 'Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but do not see, who have ears, but do not hear' (Jer.5: 21), God proclaims to the people of Judah through the prophet Jeremiah. But are we, any more than they were, capable of listening, changing course?

During this Season of Creation, at Benedictus, we're exploring the theme of ecological conversion, a theme that's prominent in Pope Francis's Encyclical Letter on Climate and Ecology among others. I'm wanting us to reflect more deeply on the dynamics of conversion – not just at a personal level but at a societal, cultural, political level. Last week, we spoke of conversion as involving more than education. It's not just teaching people certain facts or getting them to acknowledge certain truths; it involves an imaginative shift in the way we see everything – the way we see ourselves in relation to the life around us and how that changes our living. We also noted, however, that the call to this kind of imaginative shift often provokes resistance, even hostility. And what I'd like to focus on this week is this question of

resistance. How are we to understand our tendency, our culture's tendency, to refuse beyond all reason to be changed, converted, awakened? What is it that's so hard about being drawn more deeply into loving relationship with the life of the world?

Resistance to ecological conversion has a couple of obvious explanations. At the end of his encyclical, Pope Francis offered prayers for the earth which included the words: 'Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the earth'; 'Enlighten those who possess power and money that they may avoid the sin of indifference, that they may love the common good, advance the weak, and care for this world in which we live'. Indifference, inertia, greed, control. What's so hard (it seems) about being awakened to the plight of the earth, drawn to care more deeply, is that there will be things we must give up. If our vision of the world is transformed, if we no longer see it as a pot of endless resource exploitable for our benefit, but as our sister for whose life and well-being we're answerable, then there are habits of life, means of production, from which we must divest. And yet these are things that some of us, some of our leaders, are deeply invested in.

At the most obvious level, then, our world's radical ecological conversion is being thwarted by those indulging deluded self-interest at the expense of the rest of us. And what allows this to go on is the acquiescence, the apathy or denial of many more. The prophet Jeremiah threw himself endlessly against the brick wall of his people's refusal to see disaster bearing down on them, their complicity in falsehood and complacency. 'An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land', he cried: 'the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule as the prophets direct' – and – 'my people love to have it so'. They don't want to know. Which is all very well, Jeremiah points out, 'but what will you do when the end comes? (5:31).

So – self-interest, greed, apathy, denial – and no doubt lurking underneath, fear, overwhelm, the sheer difficulty of radical change. All these, are relatively obvious explanations for the resistance to being converted, ecologically and otherwise. But having said this, I sense there's one more layer to be explored in

relation to this question of resistance to conversion, and that this might really matter. It's got to do with the impact of our attachment to our moral identity, our goodness.

Here's a story that helps explain what I mean. A few weeks ago it was NAIDOC week – the week Australia celebrates the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A friend told me about her seven year old niece, who was learning at school that week something of the story of Aboriginal dispossession, the colonial theft of First Nations' land. Telling her aunt what she'd learned, the little girl seemed to think that she herself was Aboriginal. Her aunt – somewhat puzzled – sought to correct her misapprehension. No, she said – our family is white, we're European descent – we're not Aboriginal. 'Yes, we are', said her niece. 'We're good'.

And right there, it seems to me, and in the most innocent way, what's revealed is the human terror, the horror, of being found to be at fault, wrong, not 'good'. For a little girl, just coming to grips with racial difference, the solution to discovering yourself implicated in historical wrong-doing is to think of yourself as one of the wronged ones. 'I must be Aboriginal'. For large numbers of Australians, unable to take that route, the solution to retaining our sense of ourselves as 'good', 'right', 'justified' is to deny that wrongs were done at all. We're good, so the massacres can't have happened, or they can't have been that bad; and before we came the land wasn't really used, or valued, or even occupied. We know that, because we know we didn't do anything wrong, we can't have, because ... well, we're good.

And I wonder if something like this is going on at the deepest level of our culture's resistance to ecological conversion as well. Eco-theologian, Fred Bahnsen has written, 'The question climate change poses is how to confront the enemy within, and that is not primarily a technological or political question; it is a religious one.' He goes on: 'We now find ourselves chastened by the scope of our destructive

power The Babylonian invaders are approaching, and we have no choice but to face them—which is to say, face ourselves.’¹

Of course, the ways of seeing and being in the world that are leading us to destruction began long before any of us came along – we were born into this Western, industrial culture. Just as we were born into a society created on the back, and from the blood, of Aboriginal dispossession. But even though we’re not individually, maliciously culpable for the situation we’re in, we still find knowledge of our implication and continuing contribution to it hard to bear. So when Bill Shorten increases the target for the number of electric vehicles, Scott Morrison decries it as ‘an attack on the weekend’. And behind the utter bizarreness of this riposte, perhaps we can discern a desperate subtext – we can’t have been getting it wrong all this time, even inadvertently; we can’t have our lifestyle exposed as somehow destructive, which means we can’t admit we need to change anything. If you’re not wrong, you don’t need to be converted; and if you can’t bear the thought of being wrong, then you’ll sacrifice almost anything, everything, rather than admit the need to change.

And all this suggests that if we want to enable deep ecological conversion, then we need to strengthen our own and our culture’s capacity to bear the pain not only of the world’s suffering, but also of our own ‘wrongness’, our complicity in destruction. Traditionally, this painful owning of who we have been and what we have done is called compunction, contrition. Only as we truly face what is, acknowledge our part and bear the awful, sticky, sometimes even annihilating sense of ourselves as less than perfect, may we be truly liberated, forgiven, empowered to be differently. And I’m wondering how a culture, a society, becomes willing to undergo this kind of pain, to bear it? And how might a community like ours be part of enabling this?

¹ Fred Bahnson, ‘The Priest in the Trees: Feral Faith in the Age of Climate Change’, *Harper’s Magazine*, December 2016, pp. 45-54, p.54.

I don't think this is an easy question, but here's a couple of thoughts. Pope Francis wrote: 'Our goal is ... to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it'.² Many of us are familiar with the idea that we must suffer the hurt, the woundedness of the natural world. But the pope's words suggest to me that we must also be willing to suffer the impact of society's denial, apathy, illusion, resistance. And what's key is that we undergo this suffering not (as I have tended to do) in a spirit of blame, judgement and furious indignation, but in a spirit of solidarity in human frailty.

'My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my poor people, from far and wide in the land ... For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt; I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me'. Jeremiah rejected, Jeremiah ignored, is still capable of compassion for his people's confusion, their helpless blindness. And I'm beginning to wonder if it's our willingness not to disavow kinship even with those whose refusal to change brings disaster, that somehow creates the space, the holding where something else becomes possible. 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'. It's the same kind of energy. This isn't about giving up our sense of urgency, our truth-telling. But it does mean accepting that the *only* stance that enables sufficient space and safety for fragile, defended selves to acknowledge 'wrong' and begin to turn is the stance of solidarity, being with, forgiveness, non-rejection – not as a technique, not as a patronising attitude to the unenlightened, but in a spirit of radical humility and sorrowing love.

And what this suggests, I think, is twofold. One is that part of our vocation at this time is truly to commit to the enlarging of our love, seeking to embrace even those whose acts of omission and commission are hurting us all, seeking to see them as God sees them, fragile, wounded, defended – just like us. And the second is that our life together must make corporately visible a radical awareness that we human

² *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Australian edition (Strathfield: St Paul's Publications, 2015), p.24.

beings are not the source of our own goodness and do not have to be. Whatever we do and however we fail, God in Christ holds us in accepting, recreating love. Our practise of public confession is one sign of this faith, and is part of building our own and others' capacity to bear the pain of failure, imperfection, complicity in wrong and so free to acknowledge it in the first place.

Does this really make a difference? Does it address the magnitude of our world's need? Well, sometimes it's hard to think it does. But if the question climate change poses is, in part, a spiritual one – then it must also be addressed at the level of spirit. So let us continue to pray for our culture's ecological conversion – pray that eyes of the blind may be opened, and that all held captive by self-righteousness and fear may be freed, for all our sakes.