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On Being Earthlings (Luke 12. 22-34)

Sarah Bachelard

During this Season of Creation, we've been drawing from Pope Francis's 2015 Encyclical Letter on Ecology and Climate. Today, at the culmination of this Season, we celebrate the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, patron saint of ecology, 'that attractive and compelling figure' (Pope Francis wrote) 'whose name I took as my guide and inspiration when I was elected Bishop of Rome'.¹

The theme we've focused on over these weeks, the theme we've drawn from the papal encyclical, is the necessity for ecological conversion – not just the solving of particular environmental 'issues' or 'problems', but the reordering and renewal of our culture's relationship with creation as a whole. We've been exploring what it would mean to see ourselves truly part of the web of life, asking what needs to shift in us if we're to live out this belonging, this radical mutuality and interdependence.

In the Western spiritual tradition, St Francis of Assisi is almost unique in the extent of his conversion to the earth. In his extraordinary Canticle of the Creatures, Francis joins the praise of the whole creation. He's heard the 'word', the expression of and receptivity to God that his fellow creatures are, and now he magnifies their words in human speech. 'Be praised my Lord, through all your creatures', he sings. No man is worthy to mention your name, yet 'be praised by Brother Sun who brings the day; you give light through him. And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendour! Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness'. Be praised by Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Mother Earth. It could be easy to sentimentalize Francis – you might have seen misty

¹ *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Australian edition (Strathfield: St Paul's Publications, 2015), p.15.

devotional pictures of him preaching to the birds, perpetually full of the joys of spring. But his *Canticle's* expression of radical kinship with creation invites us, I think, to recognise something much deeper going on – something that holds promise for transforming *our* relationship with God's earth and with our own creatureliness. Pope Francis has called for an 'ecological spirituality', and in the life of St Francis we see such a spirituality emerging from the heart of discipleship.

Francis was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant who grew up neither particularly pious nor particularly interested in the family business – though he enjoyed the fruits of his father's wealth, as a man about town and then a soldier. But in 1202, aged about 21, Francis was captured in battle in the war between Assisi and Perugia and imprisoned. For a year, his captors sought a ransom for his life, and when he was finally released he returned home changed. His subsequent conversion to Christ is usually narrated in three stages.

According to legend, he was riding in the countryside one day and encountered a leper. Previously, he would have turned aside, but on this occasion he embraced and kissed him. In his *Testament*, written in 1226 shortly before his death, Francis understood this episode as the beginning of his conversion. He wrote: 'While I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I had mercy upon them. And when I left them that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body, and afterwards I lingered a little and left the world'.²

What Francis calls 'lingering' included a pilgrimage to Rome as well as times of solitude and prayer in the mountains, and in old, quiet churches around Assisi. It was during this time, while praying at the church of San Damiano, that Francis reportedly

² Philip Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p.88

heard the voice of Christ, who told him to rebuild the church. The final episode in his conversion followed from this. In order to raise money to rebuild the church (taking the instruction literally), Francis sold a bolt of cloth from his father's shop, as well as his horse. His father was furious and not only required the return of his money but also brought him up on charges with the authorities. But in the midst of legal proceedings before the Bishop of Assisi, Francis dramatically renounced his father and his patrimony; he is said to have stripped himself naked in token of this absolute renunciation. 'From now on, I can say with complete freedom, "Our Father who art in heaven"', he said. 'Pietro Benardone is no longer my father'.

Well, so far, so typically saintly – but what is it in Francis's story, the manner of his conversion and calling, that's connected so powerfully with his ecological vision, his sense of belonging to the whole world? And what resources does his example offer us?

We've heard that the final episode in Francis's conversion was his stripping naked in the public square of his home town. This gesture of stripping is, I think, profoundly significant. It's not just that Francis is cutting his ties with his father, giving up his worldly inheritance. It's that he's saying 'yes' to the creaturely condition of absolute dependence on God, on the givenness of life. Whatever illusions we may cherish that we can secure our lives for ourselves, the real truth is that we're not the source of them and we cannot hold onto them as possessions. Our conversion and growth involves recognising and embracing this, our essential poverty; it requires consenting to entrust ourselves entirely to God's goodness, God's provision. 'Consider the ravens, they neither sow nor reap ...'. This is the poverty and poverty of spirit to which Jesus is exhorting his disciples in our reading from Luke's gospel: 'do not be afraid, little flock', do not cling to securities of your own. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses knit of your trust in God, for God knows what you need.

Francis's gesture of stripping also signifies his 'yes' to the nakedness which is the heart of humility. This isn't about self-abasement, putting yourself down. Rather, it's the confidence simply to be, unadorned and unashamed. Humility is about being of the earth. Francis instructed that when he died he was to be stripped naked once more and laid flat upon the bare ground – so that he might embrace his 'Sister bodily death', at one with the earth whence he came.

Poverty, humility. To know your life as gift and not possession, means there's nothing to defend and nowhere else to get. And to consent to be simply a creature among creatures, no better and no worse than anyone else, means discovering ourselves part of what poet Mary Oliver calls 'the family of things'. The leper, formerly feared and despised, becomes one who can be embraced; the foreigner becomes one to engage in dialogue. It's no accident that, at a time when the 13th century papacy was energetically preaching the crusades in the holy land, Francis spent time in Egypt in peaceful dialogue with the Sultan al-Kamil Muhammad, and returned to Europe with a deep respect for the Islamic practice of prayer.³ Poverty and solidarity; humility and belonging – they go together.

And this is why Francis's ecological sensibility, his radical kinship with the life of the world, is no romantic or sentimental piety. Like his embrace of the leper and his friendship with the Sultan, his connection to the earth is the fruit of his radical embrace of his own creatureliness, his *practice* of dependence upon and nakedness before God. And here, I think, is where Francis has something deeply significant to offer our age, as we face *our* ecological crisis. For, at bottom, our culture's alienation from nature is sourced in alienation from the truth of our humanity. It's connected to our fear of poverty and death, our desperate attempt to make ourselves secure, to make ourselves

³ Michael Cusato OFM, 'From Damietta to La Verna: The Impact on Francis of his Experience in Egypt', *Spirit and Life: A Journal of Contemporary Franciscanism*, Vol. 12, 2008

matter, by means of possessions, prestige and aggression, at the expense our fellow human beings, of the earth and sea, and all that dwells therein.

As a culture, we must learn again to be creatures, earthlings. And this suggests that a community like this has much to offer for the healing of the world. For learning *how* to let go false sources of security and identity takes courage and it takes practice – spiritual practices like giving up worry and compulsive self-defense, practices like deep listening, compassion and trust. We're led into, sustained in these practices through prayer – the kind of prayer that brings us to stillness and silence and makes space for the working in and through us of the Spirit of God. This is the prayer that teaches us to know ourselves part of the whole, and makes us increasingly capable of simple receptivity and enjoyment. Its sacramental culmination is the Eucharist, to which St Francis had a particular devotion – this holy communion where God is joined to humanity, spirit joined to matter, and all of us welcome, reconciled and accepted, members of one another, at one with the life of the world.

So when we gather to practise this prayer, to share this communion and receive our provision from God, we become witnesses, as Francis bore witness, to the possibility of being human in a new way – our lives sourced in abundance, mercy and non-possessiveness, rather than wrested from scarcity and threat. The more our humanity is healed and transformed in this way, the more we participate in the ministry of reconciliation at the level of creation itself. On this Feast of St Francis, then, may we be ready to give ourselves over, as recklessly and joyfully as he did, to this vitalising receptivity to love.