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That They May All Be One (John 17: 20-26)

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It is a year, it seems, of cascading crisis. In Australia, we began with unprecedented and catastrophic bushfires, and a dread-filled sense that the drought might never end. Barely had the smoke cleared and the rain come, than news of an emerging global pandemic filtered through. This began (and in some places continues) as a public health crisis, but it has also precipitated a social and economic crisis whose consequences for national and international order are still unfolding. Yet barely has the resumption of some version of 'normal' been attempted post-COVID 19, than protests at the murder of an African-American man by a white police officer have erupted in Minneapolis, sweeping across the United States and well beyond, reminding many societies, including our own, of their systemic racism and institutional violence against black lives. Curfews, confusion, cities burning, a President inciting more violence and waving a Bible to justify himself. The façade of American democracy looks frighteningly shaky. And it's only June!

Each of these crises is apocalyptic in the sense that they 'reveal' or 'uncover' the truth of things. They are the manifestation of pressures, fractures and suffering become so acute that they can no longer be hidden, suppressed or ignored. And what I want to suggest tonight is that, as well as their *particular* origins and contexts, each of these crises is a manifestation of something more *generally* amiss in humanity's relationship with life. They signify not merely an unlucky sequence of disparate 'problems', but reveal a more fundamental malaise pertaining to us all.

Some of you may remember that last year, during a series of reflections on 'ecological conversion', we looked at Pope Francis's notion of 'integral ecology'. In the light of what I've just said, I think it's worth revisiting!

It's a commonplace of ecological understanding that the world's natural systems are profoundly interconnected. What we do to the soil by way of agricultural or mining practice affects the waterways that receive their run-off, which affects the oceans into which the rivers run, which affects marine life (both plant and animal), which affects the livelihood of coastal communities perhaps in quite far distant places, and so it goes. All this seems so obvious that we wonder how western modernity has for so long been oblivious to the consequences of our heedless exploitation and disruption of the great chain of being. Or how we could for so long have assumed that our human well-being was somehow separate from or independent of the well-being of the life of the world.

However, in *Laudato Si'*, his Encyclical Letter on Ecology and Climate, Pope Francis offers a further significant insight. It is that humanity's alienating vision of dominion over and independence from the larger whole doesn't only affect our relationship with the natural world. It affects how we are in relation to ourselves and each other. We live, for example, in a society that struggles to see itself bound together by a deep sense of mutual belonging and interdependence, where the good of one serves and affects the well-being of all. The consequences of this lack of connectedness for the maintenance of public health, aged care and social welfare infrastructure have been laid starkly bare in some places by the current pandemic. Similarly, the way in which alienation within societies enables and conspires in systemic racism is revealed by the disproportionate incarceration and deaths in custody of African-Americans in the US and of indigenous people in Australia.

The same alienation from a sense of the sharedness of life that gives rise to our misuse of the natural world manifests in human relationships too. So, as Pope Francis wrote in 2015: 'We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental'. This means that 'Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at

the same time protecting nature'.¹ This is what Pope Francis calls an 'integral ecology', and it's why he insists: 'there can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology'. 'There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself'.²

I find this analysis profoundly helpful because it offers a wholistic understanding of our situation. It shows how our cascading crises in apparently disparate domains – bushfires and drought, pandemic and economic fragility, social injustice and racism – are in fact different manifestations of one crisis. And it suggests that if we are going to respond truthfully and effectively to any of them, it will not be enough simply to respond piecemeal. To increase spending on public health or unemployment benefits, to address racist attitudes and historical injustice, or to invest in renewable energy and changed environmental practices. All these responses are necessary, but by themselves they are not sufficient because they do not go to the root of things. For at the root of our malaise are patterns of thought and habits of being that function to disconnect us profoundly from ourselves, from our belonging to one another and to the whole web of life. Which means that what is required for healing is a new imaginative sense of how we share a common life – a new love.

This is a vision that more and more people are, I think, being grasped by and committing to. The scale of protests at the death of George Floyd, the way his death is understood to signify the deaths and violation of thousands of others including in Australia, is a profound cry for justice and right relationship. People of all races and ethnicities are saying that we do not wish to live at each others' expense anymore, we do not wish to live divided. Simultaneously, more and more of us are hearing the cries of the natural world, and are committed to doing everything we can to restore balance in our relationship with its life, and health to the whole. And for every disturbing story of fights over toilet rolls at the outbreak of the pandemic, there have

¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Australian edition (Strathfield: St Paul's Publications, 2015), p.114.

² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p.98.

been hundreds more stories of neighbours intentionally looking out for each other, acts of courage and compassion, and genuine desire to stand in solidarity.

On the brink of his betrayal, Jesus prayed that his disciples ‘may all be one’ – one with each other and one with God, as he is one with them and one with God. ‘I in them and you in me, that they become completely one’. And despite all the divisions and despotism, despite what seems the perennial tendency for humankind to fall into alienation, this at-onement is in fact the deepest yearning, the deepest truth of human being. And even in our time of cascading crisis, where at some level ‘wrong’ seems to ‘come up to face us everywhere’,³ even here – the yearning for oneness, for peace, for love is breaking through.

And it seems to me that the call on contemplatives at such a critical time is to sustain and be sustained in the felt experience of this oneness. This is the root, the deep ground out of which the world’s healing must come. And this is the root, the deep ground to which our practice of silence and stillness, of listening and presence, restores us and so comes through us to affect the whole. In engaging the crises of our time, I do not suggest that this practice of contemplative prayer displaces the necessity for wisdom, expertise and action across a vast number of fields – scientific, legal, political, social.

Nevertheless, as the notion of integral ecology reminds us, alienation from nature, alienation from humanity (our own and others) and alienation from God are intrinsically bound together. Contemplative practice reconnects us, and at a level deeper than intellect and will. It grounds us in the deep source of our life, which reveals itself as love. Only from this ground will speech and action flow that can address the root of our malaise, and so lead in the way of life for all.

³ From the Epilogue, Christopher Fry, *A Sleep of Prisoners* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951).