

The Work of Love

The Work of Love in the Face of Doom: May 2018

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What should we do? This is the question posed by the crowd in Jerusalem in the wake of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. They've been convicted by St Peter's preaching of their complicity in an unholy act. Thinking they were doing God's will, they've been party to the killing of God's anointed, and this means they've failed to understand what it was they were really about. Brought to recognize this difficult, this 'inconvenient' truth, they are, according to the Acts of the Apostles, 'cut to the heart' and realize they cannot continue unchanged. 'Brothers', they ask, 'What should we do?' Peter's answer is direct and unequivocal: 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:37-38).

To a striking extent, facing up to the import of how we've been living puts us in the same kind of position. Thinking we've been making 'progress' and living relatively decent lives, we're now realising we've been party to unleashing violence and destruction on a planetary scale. We're appalled, 'cut to the heart', and we're asking ourselves and each other: 'What should we do?' and even, 'What must we do to be saved?' (cf. Acts 16:30) And, unlikely as it might seem, I want to suggest that St Peter's words still answer to our cry: 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'.

I'm conscious this could seem an unhelpfully 'religious' approach to the question of how to respond to our ecological crisis. Surely, it might said, rather than introduce notions of 'repentance' (let alone of baptism, forgiveness and the Holy Spirit), we'd do better to focus plainly on what we know are necessary actions. Such things as generating renewable energy, eliminating carbon emissions and other forms of pollution, reducing consumption and recycling waste, reimagining urban infrastructure and agricultural methods, regenerating

ecosystems, and negotiating internationally agreed limits and targets. Well, at one level, yes. I take it for granted that action of this kind – scientific, legislative, political, communal, household and personal – is vital. Much is already being done in these spheres, and much more must be ventured.

I think it matters, however, where such actions are sourced. It's possible that these measures can be undertaken in the spirit of ameliorating symptoms or problems, making technical adjustments or concessions within an essentially unchanged paradigm. But I've argued that our crisis is bigger than this. It requires us to confront a lack of integrity in our whole way of being in the world. St Peter was seeking to communicate to his fellow citizens, not simply that an injustice had been done to Jesus, but that this injustice revealed something amiss in their understanding of God, and their whole way of generating identity and community. In the same way, our present crisis reveals something fundamentally amiss in our self-understanding and our relationship with life.

And if this is so, then a truly effective response to our crisis and the possibility of deep healing for the world calls for something really radical – like repentance, baptism and receptivity to grace. At least, that's one way of characterizing what's needed if we're to do the work of love in the face of doom, as I hope to show.

Repenting

Repentance, first. At the end of my last talk, I said that if we seek to live well in these times, a necessary first step is to be and bear with what's happening. For us in the West, I noted, this is to undergo judgement of a sort – being willing to acknowledge how we've contributed (even if unknowingly and unintentionally) to the world's pain. I've mentioned already things we're collectively responsible for and sorry about – sea-birds starving to death on a diet of plastic, the production of trivial consumables and entertainment at vast cost to the natural

world,¹ our enmeshment in systems of global exploitation and inequality. As we face up to these difficult truths about our way of life, however, what begins to emerge is a deeper sense of what it is we need to repent of – not just what we’ve done, but who we’ve become.

Rowan Williams has suggested that our ecological crisis has its roots in a shared ‘cultural and spiritual crisis’ whose nature could be summed up by saying that we’ve lost our sense of being-in-relation to the larger web of life.² He writes: ‘we must begin by recognising that our ecological crisis is part of a crisis of what we understand by our humanity; it is part of a general process of losing our “feel” for what is appropriately human, a loss that has been going on for some centuries and which some cultures and economies have been energetically exporting to the whole world’.³

This loss of ‘feel’ for what is appropriately human manifests, he suggests, in various ways. It includes the erosion of rhythms of work and leisure – we treat ourselves and others increasingly like machines. It shows up in our impatience with the passing of time ‘so that speed of communication has become a good in itself’ and we find ourselves without ‘time’ for the very old and the very young. It manifests in our impatience with other forms of limit (including our own finitude), and our ever more compulsive and heedless consumption.⁴ Crucially, it includes also our loss of felt connection with the rest of creation. Williams says:

Many of the things which have moved us towards ecological disaster have been distortions in our sense of who and what we are, and their overall effect has been to isolate us more and more from the reality we’re part of.

For this reason, then,

¹ See George Monbiot, *Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis* (London: Verso, 2017), pp.119-120.

² Rowan Williams, ‘Climate crisis: fashioning a Christian response’ in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp.196-207, p.196.

³ Williams, ‘Climate crisis’, p.200.

⁴ Williams, ‘Climate crisis’, p.200.

Our response to the [ecological] crisis needs to be, in the most basic sense, a reality check, a re-acquaintance with the facts of our interdependence within the material world and a rediscovery of our responsibility for it.⁵

If we take this seriously, it suggests that repenting involves more than turning from some of what we do. It's also about realising how alienated we've become from our own creatureliness and dissociated from the created order as a whole. Unless we wake up to this dimension of our condition, we will not be capable of reconceiving and sustaining the kind of properly respectful relationship with the rest of life on which our lives ultimately depend. And from a Christian point of view, this is not just about self-preservation – waking up in time and doing the minimum to save ourselves. It's about recognizing afresh our human vocation to care for and tend the earth, to reverence and celebrate the gift that life is, to offer our praise and thanksgiving, and participate in life's transmission and renewal.⁶

It's one thing, however, to recognise the need for a new way of imagining and being human. It's quite another to live into this new form of life and discover its implications for us as persons and communities. In the passage from the Acts of the Apostles, this is what the exhortation to be baptised is about. And I wonder what being baptised for the forgiveness of sins might look like in relation to an ecological conversion?

Being Baptised

Baptism involves dying to one life and being raised to newness of life. It means giving up or letting go destructive or untruthful bases of identity so as to become a new creation sourced in the eternally generative life of God. To be baptised is to enter into a new network of relationships and commit to practices which sustain us in the new way of being.

⁵ Williams, 'Climate crisis', p.204.

⁶ Williams, 'Climate Crisis', p.205.

I think many of us find that the committed practice of meditation makes this baptismal dynamic something we know as a lived experience. In silent contemplative prayer, we consent to let go the old sources of our identity – the stream of thoughts and feelings that constitute our sense of self – and seek to be simply open, receptive to the person and pattern of Christ. As we persist in this way, we find ourselves increasingly liberated from destructive mindsets and habits, able to receive more freely and generously the gift of life.

Our tradition has tended to emphasise the experience of being restored to communion with ourselves, other people and God as the fruit of this practice.⁷ I'm sure I'm not alone, however, in discovering that what also comes alive is a sense of connection with the natural world. As we're liberated from self-absorption and self-concern, we become more fully aware of the greater life around us – the presence of a tree, the marvellous quickness of a bird or insect, the touch of wind and water, the immensity of sky. Contemplative practice helps us be more fully present and alive to the wonder of what is. It increases our sense of belonging to a larger whole and our reverence for its mysterious otherness.

If responding to our ecological crisis requires us to be reknitted with the natural world, reacquainted and reconciled with our place in the created order, then this suggests that contemplation is one important element of the work of love in our time. It is, I would say, a kind of baptism, a way of putting off our old mind and being forgiven – that is, released from alienating habits of seeing and being so as to enter into renewed relationship.

Like all processes of transformation, however, our journey of re-union with the natural world can be more or less whole-hearted, more or less generous and self-yielding. Speaking of our contemplative journey into God, John Main consistently warned of the danger of false resting places, of our

⁷ John Main, *Monastery Without Walls: The Spiritual Letters of John Main* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2006), p.50.

tendency to attain a certain degree of spiritual progress and think we've come far enough. Rather than allowing our practice to draw us on beyond egoic satisfaction, we settle for what he calls 'the pernicious peace'.

I think something similar can happen in our journey towards renewed communion with the natural world. We're happy to be reconnected to a certain extent. Pleased by our new awareness and enjoyment of the world's richness, we feel more alive and at home. But this can all remain essentially on our terms, an augmenting of our experience, rather than a real transformation of our being-in-relation to the world around us. Williams expresses the difference in the form of a question: 'How do we live in a way that shows an understanding that we genuinely live in a shared world, not one that simply belongs to us?'⁸ Or – in other words – how do we discover our radical interdependence with the rest of life and be open to the risk of mutuality, answerability and real relationship?

In recent years, I've been part of a group that's met annually in central Australia seeking to learn from Aboriginal people something of their relationship to the natural world – and for me, this has been a profound yet elusive revelation of what this deepened understanding might entail. I want to sketch a couple of its elements, before saying a little more about its implications for us.

First – kinship with the natural world, the felt knowledge of radical interdependence. Aboriginal people traditionally come from a particular land or 'country', a region they understand not only in terms of its geographical features, but also its stories, language and networks of human and non-human relationship. Rather than conceiving of their 'country' as belonging to them, however, Aboriginal people speak of themselves as belonging to country. More than that, they understand their land to be constitutive of their human being. Arrente woman MK Turner has said: 'The roots of the

⁸ Williams, 'Climate Crisis', p.199.

country and its people are twined together. We are part of the Land. The Land *is* us, and we are the Land'.⁹ She speaks of experiencing the veins in her country as running through her, as the veins in her arm.

At a gathering where I heard her speak, someone asked how she felt about cattle stations and fences going up across 'her' country, and she said: that happens on the surface, on the topsoil. But underneath the topsoil is the flesh of the earth and the flesh, she said, is us – it cannot be taken away. For me, this was an electrifying moment – a sudden window into a completely different way of experiencing what it is to be human, an experience of inter-being with the earth itself.

Theologian Ilia Delio has written: 'We emerge from an evolutionary process and are biologically linked to the natural world. The same currents that run through our human blood also run through the swirling galaxies and the myriad of life-forms that pervade this planet'.¹⁰ Most of us can accept this theoretically, conceptually, but we don't know it deeply for ourselves, we don't experience it. Even the mystics of the Western tradition – who speak of communion with God and of feeling themselves one with other people, don't tend to speak of this level of communion, or inter-being with the whole created order. Perhaps St Francis – with his 'Brother Sun, Sister Moon' is the exception. Yet what we glimpse in this 'Aboriginal mysticism' is the possibility of human life lived in felt kinship with the earth, the cosmos itself.

Second – answerability or responsibility. If Aboriginal people feel their lives to be in some profound sense identified and continuous with the life of the world, their 'country' is also other. It cares for the people and in turn the people must care for it and all that dwells in it. Listening to land, listening to country is at the heart of this relationship. Friends of mine tell a story of being out on country with an Aboriginal man – John (Anyemi) – who suddenly

⁹ Margaret Kemarre Turner, *Iwenhe Tyerrtye* – what it means to be an Aboriginal person (Alice Springs: IAD Press, 2010), p.15.

¹⁰ Ilia Delio, *Christ in Evolution* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), p.21.

directed them to drive off track in a particular direction. After a kilometre or two, they came to a fence in which a camel was trapped and unable to extricate itself. When asked how he knew it was there, Anyemi said he just felt there was something ‘wrong’ in that direction ... and when asked about freeing the feral animal, something introduced to the land by settlers, he said that everything that lived on his country was his responsibility. He was answerable for its well-being.

It’s clear that I can never have the same experience of land, of ‘country’, as Australia’s indigenous peoples – I am formed by a totally different culture. At the same time, I sense something of the profound difference the Aboriginal perspective makes to how human beings may be in and towards the earth. Even to glimpse their experience of inter-subjectivity with the rich and mysterious life of the world makes aspects of our lifestyle and our assumptions about economic value look shallow and repugnant if not simply absurd. It makes visible how profoundly alienated our culture is from the matrix of our being.

And I wonder if being baptized and forgiven our ecological sins, being genuinely available for the kind of reconnection that is part of our and the world’s healing, will involve something like learning to ‘listen’ to land in the way of indigenous peoples? At present, we in the West think we’re doing well if we commission an environmental impact assessment for a proposed development – where the underlying assumptions are to do with minimizing harm, determining the limits of allowable damage, deciding what the environment will ‘take’. What would it mean, though, if we related to a river system or piece of country as a ‘subjectivity’ – a sharer with us in the web of life?

Recall Williams’ question: ‘How do we live in a way that shows an understanding that we genuinely live in a shared world, not one that simply belongs to us?’ What would it mean if we determined our actions in the light of a commitment not just to the survival but the flourishing of all life, or if we assigned

economic value to regenerative projects, or conceived our human vocation as primarily not to ‘develop’ (in the sense of ‘exploit’), but to sing and celebrate the life of the world? The difference this could make to the way we relate to the environment would be analogous to the difference between a culture of slave-owners who seek to treat their slaves well, and a culture where slavery itself is simply unthinkable.

In Australia and around the world, many are finding themselves drawn into this unfamiliar journey of learning to listen to land and from the wisdom of indigenous peoples. We’re spending time on ‘country’, exploring practices for deep attending and then responding to what we hear. At one level, this ‘turn’ can seem strange and destabilizing. Sometimes I wonder if I’m just being caught in a kind of romanticism, a yearning for some supposedly ‘lost’ communion with nature. Then I remember that baptism is supposed to be destabilizing – it’s supposed to undo aspects of our received identity and habits of relating, and draw us into a larger reality and responsiveness. It does not leave us as we are, but calls us deeper into participation with God’s working in creation and redemption. And it seems no coincidence that our engagement with this practice of deep listening to land is increasing in intensity at a time when humankind is in such desperate need of recovering our connection to the living world.

So let me summarise where we’re up to. We began with the question of action – ‘what should we do?’ I’ve argued that, as well as the unsustainability of our lifestyle, our ecological crisis reveals something fundamentally amiss in our self-understanding and relationship to life. This calls for repentance – a radical change of mind and heart. It means not only acknowledging and turning from what we’ve discovered are destructive behaviours, but also becoming open to the transformation of our whole way of seeing and being in the world. Crucially, I’ve said, this involves being liberated from the habit of thinking of the world as our possession, and learning genuinely to share life – in this sense to be baptized into

a new imagining of our human identity and vocation, a new set of relationships and practices, and being open to where this might lead.

Receiving the Gift of the Holy Spirit

In this last part of the talk, I want to point to one more element involved in responding to the question, ‘what should we do?’ In terms of the schema I introduced at the beginning, it corresponds to the possibility that we may become participants in the life, the action of God by receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. In our context, three features of this promised possibility strike me as particularly important.

First is the faith that grace is available and that God is at work; that there is a power and love other than ours which seeks the world’s liberation and healing. In Gerard Manley Hopkins’s words, there remains the ‘dearest freshness deep down things’ because ‘the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with, ah, bright wings!’¹¹ This is not a power that operates by magic; nor is it some divine guarantee that everything must turn out OK. Williams writes: because the life of the world ‘reflects in varying degrees the eternal life of God, we have to say, as believers, that the possibility of life is never exhausted within creation: there is always a future’. But, he goes on: ‘in this particular context, this specific planet, that future depends in significant ways on our co-operative, imaginative labour, on the actions of each of us’.¹²

I think this is true. The gift promised in the Spirit is not that we will be rescued willy-nilly, but that, as we undergo the death of our old way of being, the possibilities of our co-operative and imaginative labour may be transformed by grace. In the New Testament, the risen Christ breathed his Spirit on the disciples gathered and its gift empowered them to live more and more as he did – sharing *in* his relationship with God and living *as* his redeeming presence in the world.

¹¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘God’s Grandeur’.

¹² Williams, ‘Climate crisis’, p.206.

To the extent they remained faithful to it, they discovered that the Spirit gave them new strength to endure and to undergo suffering without turning from love. It led to a new sense of freedom and unthreatened-ness from the coercive powers of the world, and so to bold, prophetic speech. It deepened their trust in the prior reality of abundance and mercy, which was made manifest in their generosity, their desire to heal, offer hospitality and forgive those who injured or betrayed them. And it seems to me that our receptivity to and co-operation with this same gift of empowering grace matters enormously at a time when much of our public and corporate life is corrupted by falsehood, greed and systemic inequality; when fear for the future tempts us to cut loose those in need, seeking a spurious security at others' expense – including at the expense of the natural world.

How exactly the Spirit will change each of us and expand the possibilities of our action will, of course, be different in different circumstances. For Etty, as we saw earlier, in a situation of extreme constraint, she was enabled not to evade the truth of things despite grief and despair, to yield herself ever more deeply to love despite the provocation to hate. This may seem more like 'inward' transformation than outward act, but I would not readily discount the public effect of her commitment of energy and will. Etty herself felt, in some obscure way, that her active participation in this work of love was contributing to the building of a new and quite different society.¹³

As for us, we must each discern our calling, the shape of graced and faithful action in and through our lives. Receiving the Holy Spirit, and this is the second feature I wish to highlight, brings with it significant responsibility for discerning our part in God's work of reconciliation and redemption. Again, the emphasis here is on the notion of joining in what's already underway, and the commitment to be where God's action is.¹⁴ The depth of the world's need means we simply cannot

¹³ Etty Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork*, trans. Arnold Pomerans (London: Grafton Books, 1988), p.78.

¹⁴ Cf. Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), p.47.

afford to rush around generating activity just to make ourselves feel better. ‘We are tempted to do anything as long as it seems to be good’, observed Thomas Merton, when wrestling with the question of how to respond to the nuclear threat of the early 1960s.¹⁵ But this is a kind of delusion.

In the context of the peace movement, Merton mentions the seductive pressure to ‘say something’, anything, and also notes the poet Czeslaw Milosz’s concern about ‘the danger of facile sloganeering on peace as on other subjects, and about the risks of making polarisation worse’.¹⁶ At the same time, Merton was convinced that to say nothing, or to resile from action altogether is no solution. Writes Williams in a characteristically perceptive commentary on all this: ‘You cannot turn away from action, but not all action is wise or creative: what might right action be for a contemplative?’¹⁷

At one level, there’s no general answer to this question. ‘Grace-ful’ action is fundamentally kenotic and obedient. It seeks not a life or ‘goodness’ of its own but simply to be aligned with, transparent to the action of God. This requires deep listening and a strong dose of what the poet Keats called ‘negative capability’ – that is, the willingness to wait in unknowing until the next step is given; all fruits of contemplative labour. A corollary of seeking to participate in God’s action, is that we cannot assume we know all that’s needed, nor how the work of redemption may be effected in and through us. This means that the poet or artist, the loving parent, community worker, theologian, or walker of old ways may contribute as much as the climate scientist, solar technician, or political leader does by addressing more directly (as it might seem) the world’s need. For this reason, daring to remain faithful (as best we can discern it) to our part in things is vital.

Yet having said this, I find myself uneasy at leaving this question of ‘right action’ solely as a matter for individual discernment. Is there *nothing* we can say

¹⁵ Williams, *A Silent Action*, p.60.

¹⁶ Williams, *A Silent Action*, p.60.

¹⁷ Williams, *A Silent Action*, p.60.

more generally about the demands of this time on us all? I think there is. I've argued that faithfulness simply to being human, being true to creaturely life, now entails the awakening of ecological consciousness. It's no longer possible to live authentically as if we have no impact on or responsibility for the integrity and flourishing of the life of the world. Which means that, whatever we're called to do and be, we must also cultivate a more acute sense of its implications for the ecology, the interconnectedness and life of all things. I wonder what difference it might make if we each approached our vocations in this way? Bring to mind the way you parent, create, think, preach, teach, lead; think about your way of being citizens, consumers, and members of community. Whatever the particularities of our various vocations and life situations, we cannot live as if the crisis facing the life of the world has nothing to do with us and how we live – and it's in this sense, I think, that we're all called to be ecologists now.

This leads, finally, to the third sense in which receptivity to the Holy Spirit is so important in our context. It's to do with the way the gift of the Spirit is intrinsically connected to the formation of a new kind of community – a communion of persons-in-relation. Recently, several secular commentators have argued that much of our current trouble can be traced to the evolution of false notions of human anthropology and sociality. Our neo-liberal economic system is based on a picture of human beings as fundamentally self-interested, self-sufficient and ruthlessly competitive. This fiction of *homo economicus* generates a culture of hyper-individualism (recall Margaret Thatcher's infamous claim, 'there's no such thing as society'), and is profoundly implicated in the loss of a felt sense of interdependence and so of commitment to a common good. This culture then becomes a reinforcing and downward spiral, since it seems the only 'rational' response in such a competitive and atomised world is to secure one's own interest apart from others, rather than to live generously, even sacrificially, with a view to the long term well-being of the whole.

Accordingly economists such as Kate Raworth and Charles Eisenstein, political commentator George Monbiot, and community organiser Jeremy Heimans, call for reimagining and reconfiguring of society on the basis of a new picture of human being. They invite us to recover our faith in basic human altruism, our sense of mutual dependence and commitment to common life, and they seek to demonstrate the viability of economic and political structures that nurture these ‘better angels of our nature’. In place of dysfunctional two-party politics, participatory democracy; in place of an extractive and exploitative economy based on resource use, an economic system and agricultural production that’s regenerative by design; in place of a monetary system that promotes scarcity and hoarding, one that serves abundance and exchange, and so on.

These proposals are profoundly inspiring, energising – and they feel truly possible. I agree wholeheartedly with their debunking of the fiction of ‘rational economic man’ and the spurious ‘economic laws’ that are supposed to follow from his existence. At the same time, I suspect these accounts offer an insufficiently robust account of the difficulty of sustaining communities of good will, and an insufficiently realistic sense of the transformation required even for those disposed to altruistic interdependence to become capable of the honesty, sacrifice and love that enables communal stability and flourishing under conditions of strain. The failure of idealised forms of community in the 1960s and 70s suggests that utopian reliance on basic human ‘goodness’ will not do. And though admittedly the witness of the church is not hugely encouraging in this regard, this is where a community founded not on human aspiration but on the gift and call of the Spirit promises different possibilities.

This is because, through its commitment to the journey of maturing into ‘adulthood’ and shared answerability to the One who judges and is ‘for’ each of us equally, such a community allows for the development of practices such as self-reflection, discernment and accountability, the acknowledgment of injury and failure in the context of mercy and forgiveness, and transformation of the ego-ic

self through disciplined openness to grace. This is where I believe contemplative communities and the recovery of contemplative Christianity has something distinctive and vitally important to offer those seeking to bring about transformation of human sociality for the renewal of life of earth.

Conclusion

What then should we do? For contemplative Christians, the question of action in times such as ours throws us back to the roots of our faith. Repent – that is, acknowledge what’s amiss and how we’re part of that; be baptized for the forgiveness of sins – that is, let go destructive ways of seeing and being, let yourself be drawn into practices and commitments that deepen your attunement to the real source of your life; and as this happens, receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, find yourself empowered by the energy of God’s life and so joined to God’s action in the world – capable of speaking truth, communicating love, generating real community.

John Main said it takes nerve to become really quiet.¹⁸ In the same way, it seems to me, it takes nerve to commit to the deeper work of love in the face of doom. It’s so difficult not to become fascinated by the prospect of catastrophe. Depending on temperament or circumstance, this means some of us become paralysed and despairing, some hyper-active, while others pretend nothing much has changed and business will go on as usual.

I’ve suggested that the contemplative work of love calls for something other than this. It invites us to become ever more deeply attuned and responsive to the Life of the world so that, whatever our particular gifts and skills and callings, and in whatever context we find ourselves, our actions flow out of this healing, reconciling reality and help realise it more fully. This is the ground of authentic hope and the possibility of gratitude and joy, come what may.

¹⁸ *Word into Silence* (London: Darton, Longman Todd, 1980; Canterbury Press, 2006), p.23.