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In Him All Things Hold Together (Colossians 1: 15-20)

Lent 6

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All Lent, at Benedictus, we've been exploring the theme of 'reconciliation' – that key New Testament understanding of what the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth has accomplished. We began with St Paul's proclamation to the community in Corinth that God in Christ was reconciling the world to God, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Cor. 5:19). Over the past few weeks we've been exploring what it might mean to be reconciled to God, to ourselves and to one another. Tonight, we come to the culmination of this theme – which for Paul, encompasses not only the human world but the entire creation, the reconciliation of all things. And we have the deep privilege of contemplating this gift in the light of Graeme and Jan's astonishing book, *On the Edge: A-Way with the Ocean*.¹ I've titled this reflection, 'In him all things hold together' – which is perhaps a prayer as much as a quotation from our reading. Launching a book by means of a homily risks, I know, a confusion of genres and focus – so my hope is that what follows does indeed hold together – completing our Lenten journey while also doing some measure of justice to this wild and beautiful work.

Be reconciled, says Paul. Which implies that we're not. Or at least, that there's an ever-present tendency in us towards alienation, disconnection, even enmity. We know how this tendency plays out in the human world – the ease with which conflict and distrust can be fomented between people, for example; the struggle of many to accept themselves, let alone welcome strangers or befriend and celebrate difference. What Jan and Graeme invite us to contemplate is how this tendency towards alienation plays out in our relationship to the 'other-than-human' world. They're concerned about our disconnection from the world of 'the dark-furred

¹ (Melbourne: Morning Star Publishing, 2018).

wallaby ... with joey at her side, for example', and of 'the stately spotted gums standing silently together on the hillside',² and above all about our relationship with the ocean, the achingly beautiful, shape-shifting, kaleidoscope of colour and sound and mood and girding presence that is the sea, the womb of all life on earth. Through their work, I find myself sensing more fully what the call, what *Christ's* call, to be reconciled to this 'other-than-human' world might really be about.

What began it all for them was a passage in Augustine's *Confessions* cited by French philosopher Jean-Louis Chrétien in his book, *The Call and the Response*. Augustine is searching for God and asks the earth and its creatures, the sea and the chasms of the deep, the winds and the whole air, whether *they* are God. They all reply they're not. Augustine then reports: 'I spoke to all these things that are about me, all that can be admitted by the door of the senses, and I said, "Since you are not my God, tell me about him. Tell me something about him"'. And here comes the astonishing bit. 'Clear and loud they answered, "God is he who made us". I asked these questions', Augustine writes, 'simply by gazing at these things, and their beauty was the answer they gave'.³

Of course, most of us tend to hear Augustine's words metaphorically. It's a figure of speech; this literary 'dialogue' with the world is simply a picturesque way of making a theological point.⁴ Or is it? Graeme and Jan then encounter the work of Yuin elder, Uncle Max Dulum-un-mun Harrison, who seems to say something similar: 'When I take people [whitefellas] out into the land I say: "Let's watch the land talk to us". And you'll see some jaws drop. But that's what it's doin' – it's talking to us without a voice. Our land does that all the time; our water does that, our wind'.⁵ 'Do things speak?', wonder Jan and Graeme. If we were willing to listen, what might we hear them say? And how might that matter for our relationship with this world in which we live and move and have our being?

² Morgan & Garrett, *On the Edge*, p.11.

³ Cited in Morgan & Garrett, *On the Edge*, p.16.

⁴ Morgan & Garrett, *On the Edge*, p.16.

⁵ Cited in Morgan & Garrett, *On the Edge*, p.19.

On the Edge is the story of a pilgrimage. Graeme and Jan call it a standing pilgrimage made on the beach at Tathra over several years – a pilgrimage of ever deepening listening to the visible voice of the ocean. It's no easy trip. You have to learn how even to take the first step – how to listen to the voice, the being, of the world. In the book, Graeme and Jan share the practice they developed for seeing and hearing the ocean's voice – a practice they call 'sea se(h)earing'. It's essentially a contemplative practice – a discipline of embodied presence and other-directed attention. It's enabled by silence (interior and exterior) and demands the willingness to wait on the sea, humbly, receptively. This is a practice of attending they developed in conversation with the wisdom of indigenous traditions as well as their own experience, and in the journals they kept over the course of their pilgrimage what becomes clear are its challenges – the sheer physical discomfort of standing looking out to sea for stretches at a time, the sense of feeling silly, stupid and self-conscious, the sense of futility and unknowing. And as with meditation, any given session could feel boring, pointless or full of distraction.

Yet gradually, glimpses of connection emerge, a sense of communication is yielded. Sometimes there's a sense of new belonging, kinship, delight, nourishment; sometimes fretfulness, dis-ease, sorrow and a sense of profound otherness. Graeme and Jan are intensely conscious of the possibility of projection. Who's to say that what you perceive as the voice of the ocean speaking to your attentive gaze, isn't just your inward state externalised, projected into and then reflected back from the world? Who indeed? Especially when you're not only trying to listen to the voice of the ocean, but also to the voices of marine scientists cataloguing horrors not visible to the naked eye: the ocean's acidification, plastic pollution, toxic run-off from agriculture and mining, collapsing fish stocks and oceanic dead zones.

Yet, they continued to sense a 'call' to attend – a 'call' to which they persisted in responding. And occasionally, startlingly, their respectful, patient listening was met with what seemed genuinely an encounter with the Sea itself, 'unanticipated

[and] piercing'.⁶ There's the day the sea seems to initiate a 'session of restorative justice' with Graeme, charging him as the available representative of the human race with a list of crimes – of trawling, drilling, sucking 'the floor of my world', of pouring sewage, garbage, poisons and plastics into me 'until the very last corner of my world is polluted by you'.⁷ There's the day Jan is vouchsafed a vision of a woman rising from the water, like Venus, like Mary, draped in seaweed, plastic and other debris, the skin on her face and arms blotched and unhealthy.⁸ The sea, sick; the sea, crying out for justice.

These two moments, write Jan and Graeme, 'opened questions of loss and grief in visceral form. Our sadness over what is happening to the ocean was at times overwhelming, beyond our capacity to name, let alone hold or express. As the criminal in the restorative justice session we were broken open; to grief. As the diseased woman, blotched and sick, we were broken open to a devastating sight of ourselves and of our culture; to grief. And this figure, the ocean herself, weighted with rubbish now almost beyond bearing, perhaps terminally ill, is she, too, grieving?'.⁹ As Graeme and Jan's attention deepens, so too does their love; and as their love expands, what follows is heartbreak.

But how does this help? What difference does it make to the desperate state of the natural world? Jan and Graeme ask: 'Is this a journey worth taking?' In a time like ours, what's the use of a pilgrimage of learning to listen to the voice of the sea?¹⁰

Well, the ocean, as they repeatedly affirm, is the necessary condition of our human survival. Not only is the sea the womb of all life on earth, but without the sea we'd have no air to breathe, no water to drink or grow our food, no habitable range of temperature. 'No blue, no green', says oceanographer Sylvia Earle. If nothing else, sheer self-preservation should impel us to care about what happens to the ocean

⁶ Morgan & Garrett, *On the Edge*, p.143.

⁷ Morgan & Garrett, *On the Edge*, p.144.

⁸ Morgan & Garrett, *On the Edge*, pp.150-151.

⁹ Morgan & Garrett, *On the Edge*, pp.158-159.

¹⁰ Morgan & Garrett, *On the Edge*, p.197.

and change our destructive ways. But if that's all our caring stems from and amounts to, can you hear how utterly self-centred it is, how profoundly impoverished; how it simply perpetuates our culture's cut-offness and alienation from the whole web of life? There's no real healing in this – for us or for the world – just more utilitarian pragmatism and the refusal to be-in-relation.

The pilgrimage which Jan and Graeme have trodden and into which they invite us is, by contrast, a real journey of reconciliation; it's a journey into a living responsiveness, a communicative relationship. It *does* call for changing our behaviour and repenting of our ecological vandalism. But what they reveal is that the possibility of transforming our way of being at any level that really matters is connected to our willingness to see and hear the unfathomably precious and independent *life* of the world, to open ourselves to love. We seek to save what we love, they write – and 'where there is no love, there is no salvation'.¹¹ But it's a crucifying journey.

The pilgrimage to reconnection will mean encountering the world's wounds and our part in them, letting them touch and grieve us, undergoing the pain of them, offering ourselves to be a place where sorrow and suffering may be met, embraced, forgiven, transfigured. In Christ, Paul says, 'God was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor. 5:19), reconciling 'all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross' (Col 1:20). Discipleship means offering ourselves to be where Christ is, to share this work with him. For 'in Christ' we are participants in the love that is the source of the world's life, and its healing. Opening ourselves to this love will break our hearts, and in the very same movement will bring us fully home.

This Holy Week, as we remember Jesus and join with his journey to the cross, and as we receive what Jan and Graeme have gifted us by sharing so generously their way with the ocean, I pray that we may give ourselves anew to participate in this work of reconciling love, that we and the whole earth may be free, and all things *live* to praise God's name.

¹¹ Morgan & Garrett, *On the Edge*, p.199.