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Buying Fields Under Siege (Jeremiah 32: 1-3a, 6-15)

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Over the past few weeks, during this Season of Creation, we've been reflecting on the notion – the imperative – for the wholesale ecological conversion of our culture, trying to understand the dynamics of such a shift and what enables it. Over the last 10 days alone, we've seen played out on the world stage the sheer *agon*, the struggle, intrinsic to this process.

In the student led global climate strike last Friday, and in raw and powerful speeches by 16-year-old Greta Thunberg, the UN Secretary General and others at the Emergency Climate Summit, we've heard impassioned pleas for the world to wake up to the reality of our situation and to take radical action to avert ecological collapse. Millions of us participated to magnify these cries from the heart – a call for transformative change unlike any the world has known.

And yet we've also seen what forces are at work to push back, silence or refuse this cry. There's the committed oblivion of some leaders of nations, including our own; the distorting, even deranged denial of some commentators; and the inertia, fatalism and sheer ignorance of many. And at a time when, more than any other in human history, we really are all in it together, we've seen that our world's leaders cannot even gather, let alone agree to act dedicatedly and in concert. Which suggests that Pope Francis's call for an 'integral ecology', in which we understand the well-being of the earth, of the poor and of ourselves to be intimately connected, remains beyond the capacity of some to imagine or even desire.¹

So it feels as though we're teetering on the brink – both ecologically and societally. We're poised on the cusp of the environment's tipping point into chaos.

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

And we're poised on the cusp of humanity's choice between life and death. Will we tip collectively towards sanity and the transformation of our relationship with the natural world, or will we instead continue lemming-like to extinction? Is the kind of ecological conversion that's required going to be possible for us, collectively? Or not?

So, given that we stand on this brink, what I'd like to explore tonight is the question of what's required of people like us now. How are we to live, act, pray? What might it look like for us to throw our weight behind the possibility of a future, to choose and enable rather than refuse and destroy the life of the world? These are questions each of us must face for ourselves. But as I've been with them (again) this week, I sense there are at least three aspects to the work required of us – and I offer these in the service of your own reflections.

The first aspect of the work is, I think, the necessity of 'pain-bearing'. This is a theme I've touched on before, but I believe it's essential. In fact, truth be, it's unavoidable if we consent to stay awake, to remain conscious in this time. The pain we must bear is multi-layered. There's the grief of witnessing our beloved earth suffer, knowing that whole species are going out of existence and that even our lives, and certainly the lives of our children and grandchildren are seriously threatened. Every time we see a tree dying because of drought, a beach littered with plastic, images of animals starving or displaced, and forests on fire, it hurts – if we're awake, that is, if we consent really to see.

This grief is then compounded when the cries of the earth and our cries on her behalf go unheeded; when we feel ourselves patronised and dismissed by those causing the suffering or in a position to act. There's a phrase in the 2017 Statement from the Heart, the so-called 'Uluru statement', issued by Australia's indigenous people that tells of their long experience of this kind of pain. They speak of the 'torment of their powerlessness', and this sense of 'tormented powerlessness' increasingly resonates for me in the environmental context. And finally, there's the pain of contemplating the loss of whole facets of human culture and unique ways of life – what we'll all lose when Kiribati and Tuvalu become uninhabitable, or Inuit

communities collapse, and centuries old rituals and stories lose their point of reference in the natural world.

Because this is all so hard, because we can hardly bear it, we tend (I tend) to push it away, to pay intermittent attention, to distract myself with other projects and hope it won't be so bad. Perhaps to some extent we must do this. No doubt some kind of psychological survival mechanism is at work. Yet already there are people living in places who don't have the option of ignoring or denying this pain – the loss of livelihood, of beloved features of landscape and season, of fellow creatures, is their daily reality. It seems to me that our being willing to share this suffering, to bear it, is part of the solidarity that's a condition of the emergence of a truly 'integral ecology'. And, from a Christian perspective, it's also intrinsic to the possibility of suffering's transformation. The way of Christ teaches that it's only as we get really present to what's destructive and unhealed, only as we undergo its pain and draw it into ourselves compassionately, without resistance or self-protection, that something else becomes possible – that some of the underlying energies that keep life stuck are enabled to shift. This is the cruciform way, sharing in the sufferings of Christ, bringing the world's alienation to the reconciling heart of God. The work of pain-bearing in prayer.

The second aspect of the work required of us is that we 'act integrally' – which means doing all we can to care for the natural world and minimise our own ecological footprint. This isn't about securing our 'innocence'. I said a couple of weeks ago that we're all unavoidably complicit in systems that consume, exploit and harm creation – we were born into them, and cannot simply extract ourselves at will. So the goal here isn't to have perfectly clean hands – it's about integrity and deepening connection. It means being mindful of our choices and their impact – realising that what that looks like for each of us in relation to consumption and diet, transport choices, air travel, energy and plastics use, recycling and upcycling, will be different according to our roles, circumstances and needs. But we must keep asking these questions.

I don't mean to suggest it's all up to us or that governments can be allowed to outsource their environmental responsibilities to individuals – as if the problems can be addressed if only enough of us change our light bulbs and take shorter showers. Even so it remains important, as Pope Francis has said, not to neglect the significance of our daily choices and personal actions. 'We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world', he says. And their capacity to change things isn't just a function of their direct impact. It's also that such efforts 'call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread'.² The pope is reminding us, in other words, that the transformation of consciousness is a corporate and cultural matter – it's cumulative and exponential. The fewer people who smoke in a society, the fewer people begin to smoke and the easier it is to give up; likewise, when more of us cease to take endless consumption and a throw away lifestyle for granted, the harder it is for others to continue in this vein – a cultural shift gets underway. This is the significance of acting 'integrally' – with integrity.

And finally, a third aspect of the work required of us is what I call 'acting "as if"'. Which brings us, at last, to our reading. The prophet Jeremiah has been our companion throughout this series on ecological conversion – Jeremiah calling on his people to wake up, warning that their ways are leading to disaster; Jeremiah derided and ignored. Tonight we heard, in an extraordinary parallel with our times, that even when the army of the king of Babylon is actually besieging the city, the disaster he's warned of manifestly coming to pass, it's *Jeremiah* who finds himself in prison. *He's* the one the king puts under guard, not the denialists, not the misinformers, but the truth-teller in the land. Just as some Australian governments are seeking to criminalise climate activism, while bushfires rage, the rivers run dry and Alan Jones is still at large ...

But here's the even more extraordinary thing. Jeremiah's in prison; the city is about to fall; and the word of the Lord comes to him, saying he's to be offered the chance to purchase land, the field at Anathoth that's belonged to his cousin Hanamel

² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p.165.

(Jer. 32: 6-7). In Israelite law, the right of redemption ensures that land belonging to a family's inheritance remains intact. If you're offered land under these circumstances, you're more or less obliged to buy it from your kinsman – and since the word of the Lord has given Jeremiah advance warning of this event, the prophet understands he's supposed to accept his cousin's offer.

Except, it hardly seems the moment to be buying real estate in Judah – the citizens of Jerusalem are to be sent into exile, and who knows if they'll ever be allowed return. Yet, Jeremiah hands over his shekels – seventeen shekels of silver, to be precise – and the whole transaction is elaborately recorded and notaried in the presence of multiple witnesses. The text goes to great pains to insist on the solidity, the unbreakability of this transaction. Therefore, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that this performance is not just economic and legal – it's theological. It's the enacting of God's promise that there will be life after Babylon, life after exile.³ 'For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land' (Jer. 32: 15). Jeremiah has no guarantee of this apart from the promise, the being of God – but he acts 'as if' he will return, 'as if' life in the land will be renewed.

Now in our context, what it means to act 'as if' is a subtle thing. One of our problems is that too many think that we just can continue business as usual – buying and selling real estate, extracting and burning fossil fuels, growing the GDP by whatever means we please – 'as if' the future will be more or less continuous with the past. But Jeremiah's 'as if' wasn't like this. He knew there was to be a radical break, a long and difficult season of transition. So his acting 'as if' was not about carrying on business as usual; rather it was about refusing to concede the total foreclosure of the future. It was about imagining what life renewed and healed might look like on the other side of this crisis, and staking himself for its realisation.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1998), p.303.

What might this look like for us? For parents and grandparents, teachers and churches, I think it means empowering our children and young people, nurturing their sense of belonging to and responsibility for the whole. It means committing now to encourage and enable truly integral ecologies – at home, at work, in community and the civic square. It means supporting, *demanding* the emergence of a regenerative economy, of regenerative agriculture, and investing ourselves in work for peace and deepened understanding. In such a time as this, as for Jeremiah, there is no guarantee we'll survive the crisis, the exile. But we cast ourselves anyway into the future we know God desires for all, we put our weight behind the movement towards life and we give it everything, living now from and in accord with the future we're called to realise.

Brueggemann says: 'Prophetic faith is a voice for life in a world that is bent on death. Prophetic faith is a risky practice of sanity in a world trapped in madness'.⁴ This is our faith and it is our call – as it was for Jesus, who 'for the sake of the joy that was set before him, endured the cross' (Heb. 12: 2) and now lives again to share life with all. And so may it be for us and for our world.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Like Fire in the Bones: Listening for the Prophetic Word in Jeremiah*, ed. Patrick Miller (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), p.142.