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Gods That Are No Gods (Jeremiah 2: 4-13)

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In his 2015 Encyclical Letter on Ecology and Climate, Pope Francis characterised with great clarity and power the roots of our contemporary ecological crisis, and he called for an ‘ecological conversion’. Our sister, Mother Earth, he wrote, ‘cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her’. In the pope’s view, it won’t work to frame our engagement with this crisis merely as a series of discrete problems to be solved – energy generation, waste disposal, species loss and so on. Rather, any adequate response to our ecological situation must involve a shift in our whole way of seeing and being in the world. ‘Many things have to change course’, Pope Francis said, ‘but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal.’¹

Tonight we begin our celebration of the Season of Creation – a season relatively new to the Christian calendar, offered by the churches as an opportunity to celebrate the gift of life and commit to a ministry of healing and care for the earth. This year, in our Benedictus observance of this season, I want to focus on Pope Francis’s notion of ‘ecological conversion’. Except, of course, that in relation to this theme, I’m conscious of preaching to the already converted. Questions of ecological suffering and ecological justice are often prominent – you may have noticed (!) – in our reflections and liturgy, and many of you I know are deeply concerned about the state of the world and well aware of the need radically to transform whole aspects of

¹ *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, Australian edition (Strathfield: St Paul’s Publications, 2015), p.159.

our way of life. I know also – I feel in myself – that it’s painful to keep hearing about the critical state of our planet in a context where we feel constantly frustrated and disempowered by delusional politics and societal apathy, as our collective future is sabotaged by leaders who seem stubbornly invested in business as usual. I’m clear, in other words, that **we’re** not the ones, by and large, who need to be convinced, or to hear it all again.

And yet, having acknowledged this, I have a sense that it might still be valuable for us to explore in more depth this notion of ecological conversion. Recently, I’ve found myself wondering about the dynamics of conversion – not just at a personal level but at a societal, cultural, political level. What enables wholesale social change – what prepares the ground for it? And how might we, as individuals and as a community, participate in the transformation of consciousness that Pope Francis – along with many others – is urgently calling for?

The word ‘conversion’ is itself significant. It’s not simply about education, teaching people certain facts, convincing them to accept certain truths – the science of climate change, for example. Conversion has to do with a response of the whole person – it involves a turning at the level of heart and soul as well as mind; it implies a change of direction, orientation and commitment, coming to a new way of seeing things that transforms your relationship to them. I feel like I’ve undergone one myself, in relation to this issue, and maybe this is true for you as well?

I’ve always loved the natural world – being in the bush, going on picnics by the Murrumbidgee as a child. Even so, for many years I think I tended to see the ‘environment’ largely as the stage set for our human drama. I admired its beauty, enjoyed it as ‘scenery’, but experienced myself (without even realising it) as somehow separate, apart from it. In recent years, however, thanks in part to contemplative practice and thanks also to what I’ve learnt from indigenous teachers and others, something has shifted for me at a much deeper level. It’s like I now ‘see’ the world differently; I find myself reverencing it, actively loving it, caring for *its* experience and struggle, knowing my belonging. It hurts now to see others disregarding the earth – rubbish littering the sides of the roads, advertisements for

four-wheel drives brutalising creek beds and beaches, and that's before we even get to gross and destructive practices like chemical agri-business, industrial fishing, fracking and off-shore drilling.

Of course, converted or not, I continue to use and consume the resources of the earth. Farming, mining, hunting, drilling – we all rely on products of these activities. As poet, farmer and environmental activist, Wendell Berry acknowledges: 'To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation'. But this is the critical bit. 'When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skilfully, reverently', Berry says, 'it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration'.²

I take it that the ecological conversion of which Pope Francis, the kind of conversion to which our culture is called, involves this shift from a desecrating to a sacramental relationship to our world. If we're truly to turn from our society's destructive and self-destructive course, we must discover a new and renewed sense of belonging and answerability to the whole; an active care for the flourishing of the whole earth community, in the light of which many of our habits of consumption and acquisition will come to seem simply tawdry, unattractive, un compelling.

But how does this actually happen? What does the process of ecological conversion involve? And how might it be enabled for more of us? I've already suggested that conversion isn't just a fruit of argument and evidence – though these are important and play their part. It involves a shift in how we see the world as whole, a transformation in our imaginative sense of things. When the prophet Jeremiah exhorts the people of Jerusalem to wake up to the danger they face, he doesn't simply focus on reports of an enemy force massing at the northern border – a strategic problem to be solved (1: 14). Instead, he calls upon them to recognise something in their way of life, a failure to be properly connected to the truth of God and themselves which has led them into destructive habits and unwisdom, making them vulnerable as they go after worthless things.

² Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays*

In our context, it's the prophetic voices of indigenous people, of poets and artists, scientists and environmentalists, of children and all who ache with love for the earth that are helping more of us to see more deeply how we've failed to be properly connected to reality. 'My people have changed their glory for something that does not profit', Jeremiah cried. 'Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord'. As we listen to the prophets of our time, we're starting to be appalled that our culture so stupidly fell for the absurd idea that the value of the natural world may be measured primarily in human terms, as a set of resources to be exploited and exhausted. We're learning to be shocked that a whole economic system relies on the fiction of the environment as an 'externality', whose well-being is somehow seen as a dispensable luxury in a world focused on 'jobs and growth'. We're beginning to see through the illusions on which our way of life has been based, the 'cracked cisterns we've dug for ourselves', that are no longer holding water.

And yet, just because this new vision involves a willingness to let some things go, to see ourselves newly answerable to the needs of the world around us, these prophetic voices are met with resistance (just as Jeremiah was resisted by Jerusalem). It's understandable that those whose identities and livelihoods are bound up with our old ways should feel uncertain, threatened by the call to change. But in contemporary Australia, the necessary process of conversion is even further hamstrung by those whose power and influence are sourced in the current system. In Jeremiah's terms, as a people we suffer from those priests (ministers of the crown) who handle the law without respecting the law; from rulers who transgress against truth and official spokespeople (pseudo-prophets) who prophesy according to false gods.

In coming weeks, we'll return to these issues – the question of how we might connect more fully with reality and respond to the resistance we face. But let me finish now with a final reflection on the nature of conversion – which is, I think, significant. It's that ultimately, conversion is a kind of gift, grace. It's something that happens to and for us – the scales fall (as if suddenly) from our eyes. 'I was blind, and

now I see'. Mostly, a level of readiness and availability is required, a willingness to see newly. But the event of conversion, that deep, felt shift in our sense of things is always something given. You can't make it happen for yourself or to someone else, you can't force it. So what does this mean in a context like ours, when the very life of the world depends on there being something like a wholesale cultural conversion?

Well, we know in our own journeys of transformation, conversion, when we're stuck, afraid, or just unable to let go destructive ways of being, that prayer is absolutely critical. By prayer, here, I mean not just vague petition, but a committed placing of ourselves in the way of grace, opening ourselves as best we can to the energy of God's life, being available for the work of the Spirit within us. What if the same is true for the conversion of a culture, a society? If I think about the history of non-violent movements for radical social change – the abolition of slavery, Gandhi's resistance to the British in India, the civil rights movement in the US, the abolition of apartheid in South Africa – it seems not insignificant that all these movements were undergirded and permeated by prayer. What if prayer is part of what's necessary to enable the shift in consciousness that our world now so urgently requires? And if it is, what might this look like?

For me, it involves letting myself be present to the stuck-ness, intransigence and wilful blindness that I sense blocking the shift that's seeking to be made. It means drawing this stuck-ness into myself, and then bringing it before God, bringing it to the light, offering it to be softened, released, remade. I believe this is a work for a contemplative community, part of our vocation. So as we begin this season of creation, this series of reflections on ecological conversion, I invite you to join me in this work of prayer. Let us intentionally, regularly, self-givingly seek to open channels in ourselves and in our world for God's action to break through, for the fountain of living water to flow out of that vast hinterland of grace on which all life, and all life's renewal, depends.