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Integral Ecology (Jeremiah 5: 22-29)

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Each week in our liturgy for this Season of Creation, I'm drawing our closing responses from the famous speech by Chief Seattle which includes the words: 'This we know, all things are connected, like the blood that unites one family. This we know, whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves'. This notion of the interconnectedness of natural systems and life-forms, the sense of the 'web of life', has become a commonplace of ecological understanding. What we do to the soil by way of agricultural or mining practice will affect the waterways that receive their run-off, which will affect the oceans into which the rivers run, which will affect marine life (both plant and animal), which will affect the livelihood of coastal communities perhaps in quite far distant places, and so it goes.

All this now seems so obvious that we wonder how western modernity has for so long been seemingly oblivious to the consequences of our economy's heedless exploitation and disruption of the great chain of being. Part of what's blinded us, perhaps, is the fact that the earth system has (historically) been so vast in relation to human culture and action, that we haven't imagined ourselves capable actually of exceeding planetary limits, or unleashing irreversible damage. And perhaps compounding this is the fact that more and more people do not experience a lived, daily connection with the natural world. Many of us spend most of our time indoors, in temperatures we control artificially, obtaining our food neatly packaged from supermarket shelves and our water at the turn of a tap. We don't experience our daily dependence on the well-being of the earth, the fruiting of berries and grains in due season, the springing up of water in wells and streams. So we forget that, as the founder of ecological economics Herman Daly once said: 'The economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment, not the reverse'.

Christianity too has played a role in enabling this culture of disconnection. Pope Francis, among others, has suggested that an ‘inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology’ has given ‘rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world. Often, what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something that only the fainthearted cared about’.¹ And yet, as an earlier Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II had said: ‘Once the human being declares independence from reality and behaves with absolute dominion, the very foundations of our life begin to crumble, for “instead of carrying out [our] role as a cooperation with God in the work of creation, [humanity] sets [itself] up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature”’.² This much we’re starting to realise.

But in his Encyclical Letter on Ecology and Climate, Pope Francis offers a further and I think very significant insight into the significance of our insensitivity to the ‘web’, the interconnectedness of life. It’s that our alienated vision of dominion over and independence from the larger whole, affects not only our relationship with the natural world. It affects our relationship with ourselves and with each other. Remember Chief Seattle: ‘whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves’. And the effects of this alienation from our humanity are increasingly obvious.

We live, for example, in a society that struggles to see itself bound together by any real sense of mutual belonging and interdependence, where the good of one serves and affects the well-being of all. In fact, it’s as if competition and the rivalry to get ahead are now considered more or less constitutive of civic and economic virtue. As a consequence, the divide between rich and poor grows exponentially, as if those who are successful, ‘masters of the universe’, can simply do without the rest or use them up as an exploitable resource. The poor and vulnerable become fodder for the capitalist machine through casualised labour or modern day slavery; while those

¹ *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, Australian edition (Strathfield: St Paul’s Publications, 2015), p.97.

² *Laudato Si’*, p.98.

unable to serve the system or keep up the pace because of ill health, age, disability or other forms of disadvantage are increasingly disregarded, considered expendable in the race to ... what? Prosperity? Economic growth? Efficiency? As Jeremiah said: 'scoundrels are found among my people: they take over the goods of others. Like fowlers they set a trap, they catch human beings' (Jer. 5: 26).

This alienation from our humanity plays out in our personal lives, as well. Many in our culture struggle to acknowledge and allow room for their own limits, vulnerabilities and needs. We fend off mortality, repress shame and sadness, and are impatient with failure. The same imaginatively stunted and alienated vision that leads us to destroy the life of the world leads us into increasingly destructive attitudes to the lives of other people and our own. 'Your ways and your doings have brought this upon you. This is your doom; how bitter it is! It has reached your very heart', says the prophet (Jeremiah 4: 18).

And so, Pope Francis writes: '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'.³ Pope Francis calls this 'integral ecology', and 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'.⁴

I find this analysis profoundly helpful because it offers a wholistic understanding of our situation. And it suggests that being drawn towards ecological conversion isn't only going to require that we change our environmental practices. It will also mean becoming aware and repenting of the patterns and habits of being that function to disconnect us from our own well-being, our sense of belonging to one another. After all, whatever we do to ourselves, we do to the web.

So what might this more integral awareness and repentance actually involve? Like Pope Francis, Rowan Williams has said that 'our ecological crisis is part of a crisis

³ *Laudato Si'*, p.114.

⁴ *Laudato Si'*, p.98.

of what we understand by our humanity', and involves the loss of "'feel" for what is appropriately human' which manifests in various ways. For example, there's 'the erosion of rhythms in work and leisure, so that the old pattern of working days interrupted by a day of rest has been dangerously undermined'.⁵ Increasingly we treat ourselves and others, as we treat the natural world, like machines. There's distortion in our relationship with the passage of time which has itself become commodified. We're anxious about wasting or losing time, and so unable to lean into or find anything valuable in the dynamic of waiting. The result, Williams points out, is 'that speed of communication has become a good in itself', and we find ourselves without 'time' for the very old and the very young, let alone the unfolding of natural processes. And this is part of a more general impatience with any kind of limit, including to our habits of consumption, and 'a fear in many quarters of the ageing process – a loss of the ability to accept that living as a material body in a material world is a risky thing'.⁶

And it seems to me that a thread running through all these attitudes and habits of being is a kind of relentlessness, a lack of tenderness, humility and forgivingness, a tendency to snatch at life and consume it rather than reverence it as gift. None of this is conducive (ultimately) to real enjoyment or to a fundamentally compassionate social fabric – so no wonder underlying levels of stress and anxiety are at record highs. A culture has grown up in late western capitalism that is toxic – not only for the natural world, but for us as well. Of course, within this context millions of people seek to live decent, integrated, caring lives – but more and more, it's as if the systems in which we're enmeshed work against us, squeezing out room to breathe and capacity to connect. And this suggests that a truly integral ecological conversion must also involve a quite radical reimagining of our economy and social institutions, of labour practices, housing and urban planning, and cultural life.

⁵ Rowan Williams, 'Climate crisis: fashioning a Christian response' in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp.196-207, p.200.

⁶ Williams, 'Climate crisis', p.200.

Now pretty obviously, this will require large-scale political vision and structural reform! But, I wonder if we might begin to participate in this process by asking how these patterns of alienation manifest in our own lives and in the systems of which *we're* part? Have a think, for example, about how the rhythms of work and leisure look like in your life, your workplace? And about how you experience your relationship with limits and the passage of time? The point of these questions isn't to make us feel bad about how un-Zen-like we are! We're all caught up in dynamics bigger than us, that form us and are hard to resist – that's the point! But once we become aware of what they are and how they affect, not just us, but the whole web of life of which we're part ... well, that offers a new perspective.

Some of you will have heard of Extinction Rebellion. It's a movement for non-violent climate action which involves a degree of civil disobedience; it aims deliberately to disrupt business as usual as the next step in the campaign to save our world. Its work is, I think, important and necessary. But I wonder - might there be other forms of 'civil disobedience' that we're also called to contemplate if we're to enable the turning of our juggernaut of a web-of-life destroying system? Other forms of non-violent direct action that might help create conditions for transforming our alienating culture?

Such radical things, for example, as taking a regular day off, or turning off your phone after hours. Such things as challenging the casualization of labour in universities, research institutes, hospitals and schools, as in other places. Such things as practising tenderness and compassion towards your ageing body. Such things as the deepening of regular, daily prayer – so we come to know deep in our hearts that we're both held by and ultimately answerable to One who is not defined by deforming human systems, but who passionately yearns for the good of all, the gift of whose Spirit gives us courage to stand against injustice in all its forms.

I don't say any of this lightly – I know it's not easy to discern and enact some of these forms of civil disobedience, especially when livelihoods, collegial expectations and the needs of others are involved. But Pope Francis's notion of 'integral ecology', and our reading from Jeremiah makes very clear that alienation

from nature, alienation from humanity (our own and others) and alienation from God are necessarily bound together. The good news in all this is that the journey towards reconnection can begin in any dimension of our life, and that increasing wholeness in one area affects everything else. The difficult bit is that, in a structurally dis-eased culture, the journey might cost a lot. So as we face these deeply challenging times, let us continue to pray for our own and our culture's conversion, and for the courage to offer ourselves in the service of justice and the promise of true and truly shared peace.