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## **Reverencing the Templum (John 2. 13-22)**

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The story of Jesus cleansing the temple is oddly placed in John's gospel. In Matthew, Mark and Luke it's narrated straight after Jesus' final, triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It's a subversive act guaranteed to provoke the authorities, and a catalyst for his arrest, trial and crucifixion. John, by contrast, places this event almost at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and connects it to his blasphemous claim about the non-necessity of the Temple building. 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up', Jesus says. The authorities reply: 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But they'd mistaken his meaning. 'He was speaking of the temple of his body', John writes, and 'after he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this'.

I think we get a deeper sense of Jesus' claim when we learn that, in ancient Rome, the 'templum' wasn't in the first instance a building. Rather it was a defined space, an area that had been approved by the augurs (or priests) for the taking of auspices (that is, for seeking signs from the gods). A templum could be any place that was marked off from the surrounding land by a certain solemn formula, and in fact the designated area of sky in which an augur took auspices was also termed a 'templum'. So the holiness of the templum, and by extension of any building constructed in that space, is a function of its enabling divine-human encounter. Here you may meet God.

In the passage we just heard, then, Jesus is proclaiming himself to be a new kind of sacred site; 'he was speaking of the temple of his body'. Access to God is henceforth given in and through him. This doesn't preclude (in Christian understanding) there being other sacred spaces and sites, other '*templa*'. There are the 'thin places' recognised by Celtic spirituality, the saints and holy people through whom the divine light is seen to pour more obviously, indeed the whole creation

saturated with God's glory, 'charged with the grandeur of God', as poet Gerard Manly Hopkins put it. On this vision, insofar as we (like Christ) are porous to God, we may ourselves be 'temples', spaces of divine-human encounter. St Paul wrote: 'do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?' And significantly, the very word 'contemplation' incorporates *this* sense of the 'templum'. Contemplation is about being *in* the temple *with* the divine, and, John Main says, 'the temple is your own heart, your own centre'.<sup>1</sup>

At one level, then, this story of the cleansing of the temple seems to say that God can be encountered anywhere. The Temple building is, in an important sense, non-necessary. God is not confined to religious buildings controlled by religious folk. At another level, however, it seems that Jesus does care that a particular place designated as holy not be heedlessly desecrated by those seeking to use it self-interestedly, or pollute it by injustice and exploitation. 'Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple ... He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves: "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"'

Western secular modernity seems to have taken strongly to heart the first lesson of this text. If God is anywhere, then God is everywhere. But we have not, perhaps, taken seriously enough the significance of there being particular places to which particular reverence is owed, in which we may learn to recognise the presence of the Presence, and be tuned to it. As a consequence, the whole notion of desecration has become attenuated for us. Many in our society do not recognise the world as a whole as a site of divine encounter, seeing it rather as a collection of 'natural resources' to be exploited as efficiently as possible. And many do not take seriously the special presence of the divine recognised or resonating in particular places – in ancient gathering places, sacred groves, mountains or gorges. That's why they can be so easily blown up, when it suits. And it seems to me that this loss of a lived sense of the holiness of the world, of sacred sites and the possibility of their

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<sup>1</sup> John Main, *Moment of Christ: Prayer as the way to God's fullness* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010), p.43.

desecration, has enormous consequences for the relationship in Australia between settler and First Nations peoples and cultures.

Well, this is a lengthy introduction to the theme of this reflection! As you know, during this Lent, we're exploring the question of what may be the spiritual dimension of the 'recovery' from the Covid-19 pandemic. We're conducting this exploration in conversation with *Upturn*, edited by Tanya Plibersek,<sup>2</sup> and tonight I want to venture some reflections on issues raised by the book's very first chapter.

This chapter, headed 'Remote Communities and First Nations', was written by Dr June Oscar AO, a 'proud Bunuba woman from the remote town of Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia's Kimberley region'. Dr Oscar is currently Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, and has previously held roles with the Kimberley Land Council, and Kimberley language and interpreting services. Her contribution touches on many issues: the need for a post-Covid Australia to reckon with our history of entrenched racial injustice, reflected still in the ways racism 'is normalised within the customs and practices of our society', including the lack of Constitutional recognition.<sup>3</sup> Reflected too in the disproportionate incarceration of First Nations peoples, lack of social services for First Nations communities and punitive compliance measures over First Nations lives. She calls for a commitment on the part of the federal government to indigenous self-determination and a reconstruction of fiscal arrangements 'so that public and private investment can be directed at transformational change for our communities across Australia with the goal of overcoming structural inequalities'.<sup>4</sup> What seems to me so profoundly significant about Dr Oscar's contribution, however, is the way in which she grounds this call for transformational change specifically in First Nations peoples' relationship to Country. If as non-indigenous readers we miss this grounding, then (I suspect) we miss the heart of the matter.

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<sup>2</sup> *Upturn: A Better Normal After Covid-19*, ed. Tanya Plibersek (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Oscar, *Upturn*, p.11.

<sup>4</sup> Oscar, *Upturn*, p.17.

Dr Oscar notes that at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people returned to their homelands, since (in order to prevent the spread of the virus to such a vulnerable population) remote communities were being closed to outsiders. She herself left Sydney and moved home to Fitzroy Crossing. Her chapter begins with a reflection on her conversations with family while living on Country: 'Being on Country is freedom. It's not camping out, it's about being totally alive. When we are surrounded by all human and non-human relations we are embraced by everything that makes existence possible. Together, we sit around the fire listening to the chatter and song of the animals and insects, we watch the sun and moon rise and set, and under the blanket of the Milky Way we are rejuvenated and safe, happy and at peace'.<sup>5</sup>

Again and again, the chapter returns to this theme. She tells us that Aboriginal communities and organisations rapidly disseminated culturally appropriate health information at the beginning of the pandemic 'and then located and assisted our peoples back to communities, from the city streets, park ovals and the long grasses'.<sup>6</sup> Those helped to come back were predominately homeless but 'their families and sense of home remain in remote regions'. This huge logistical effort, Dr Oscar writes, 'which could not have been achieved by mainstream organisations, has triggered the largest homelands movement seen since the establishment of remote communities and outstations'.<sup>7</sup> And she goes on: 'Throughout this period, being on homelands has proven what we have always known: that our homelands nourish us, keeping us safe and healthy, and in turn we care for the country, as has been the case for tens of thousands of years'.<sup>8</sup>

Many families chose to move to outstations and bush camps and again, she writes, 'surrounded by the wealth of our Country, culture and our ancestors, people have had the time to reconnect, tell stories, hunt, and practise and transfer our

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<sup>5</sup> Oscar, *Upturn*, p.8.

<sup>6</sup> Oscar, *Upturn*, p.13.

<sup>7</sup> Oscar, *Upturn*, p.13.

<sup>8</sup> Oscar, *Upturn*, p.14.

knowledge between young and old'.<sup>9</sup> This engagement has 'reinvigorated conversations about culture-based ways of living' and 'as we have engaged in this way of life, I have felt a renewed sense of control and empowerment sweep across our communities. There is also anecdotal evidence that, while families have been on homelands, life has been calmer. There has been less fighting and drinking, and a reported drop in incidences of family violence'.<sup>10</sup> Dr Oscar notes that returning to homelands may not be for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples, most of whom live in cities and towns, 'but it is significant to us all'.<sup>11</sup> And it leads her to recommend that governments invest in remote regions and support the growth of 'viable and productive regional homeland economies'.<sup>12</sup>

Well, this may seem a long way from Jesus cleansing the temple. But here's the link I'm seeking to draw out. It would be possible for those of us from Western, settler backgrounds to read Dr Oscar's chapter and hear mainly an appeal to such things as 'the right to self-determination', the necessity of eliminating structural injustice, a call to respect the rights to land of First Nations people and to support their return to homelands. And this is what she is saying. But it seems to me that what she offers towards a vision for our national 'recovery' goes even deeper. She seeks to communicate something of the livingness and spiritual power of Country itself, and the possibility of human relatedness to the web of existence that evokes reverence and brings renewal of life, happiness and peace.

June Oscar advocates for First Nations peoples' need for and right to enjoy communion with Country, which has been so traumatically disrupted by colonialism and more than two centuries of racist injustice. But she also intimates that the vestigial awareness in Western culture of the possibility of such communion and sacred encounter, can be strengthened by what we may learn from First Nations peoples. 'It is time to reconstruct a nation', she says, that 'embraces First Nations

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<sup>9</sup> Oscar, *Upturn*, p.15.

<sup>10</sup> Oscar, *Upturn*, p.15.

<sup>11</sup> Oscar, *Upturn*, p.14.

<sup>12</sup> Oscar, *Upturn*, p.15.

societies and culture as foundational to Australian identity. This would be an Australia that does not deny the past but actively learns and incorporates our Indigenous knowledges into systemic change as the nation becomes just, equitable and fair'.<sup>13</sup>

Speaking for myself, it's through contemplative practice that I begin to glimpse what this could actually mean, what it's *like*. It's contemplation, learning to dwell in the *templum* of the heart and the *templum* of the natural world, that is opening for me a live sense of the depth, the sacredness, of the life of the world. This possibility, this knowledge, it seems to me, is what so many First Nations people have spoken of and sought to share with white Australia; yet our culture's attenuated spiritual senses have left us all too often unable to hear what's being said, or receive what's being offered. Which suggests that if we are truly to share life together in this land, these are the senses we settlers must awaken, the *templum* we must learn anew to reverence.

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<sup>13</sup> Oscar, *Upturn*, p.18.