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At Home (James 1. 2-8, 17-18)

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We mark the Season of Creation this year in the lead up to the 26th UN Climate Change Conference, to be held in Glasgow in a couple of months. COP26, as the conference is called, is yet another key moment in the global effort to limit dangerous climate change. Its urgency has been defined by the recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change which has issued, according to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, a ‘Code Red’ for humanity. ‘The evidence is irrefutable’, Guterres says: ‘greenhouse gas emissions are choking our planet and placing billions of people in danger. Global heating is affecting every region on Earth, with many of the changes becoming irreversible. We must act decisively now to avert a climate catastrophe’.¹

We already know what we must do – politically, scientifically, economically, socially – if we’re to cease destroying our beautiful world. We’ve known it for years. The issue is committing to do it. As Pope Francis wrote in his 2015 Encyclical, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*: ‘Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of a more general lack of interest. Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions’.

It’s easy to feel despairing in the face of this intransigence. And yet, in the six years since the Pope wrote those words, there has been significant movement. Despite the continued ‘denial, indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions’ displayed by some members of the Australian

¹ Anton Guterres, ‘IPCC Report: “Code Red” for human driven global heating, warns UN chief’, *UN News*, 9 August 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/08/1097362>

government, even here shifts can be discerned. The tide of public, investor and institutional opinion has decisively turned. Whether it's enough or in time – we don't know – which is why action to overcome the inertia, corruption and 'greenwashing' that even now gets in the way of responding to the urgency of this moment needs to be strongly sustained.

This is the context in which we've previously explored, at Benedictus, the necessity for an ecological conversion. The crisis calls not merely for self-interested or technical adjustments in our use of the earth, but a fundamental reimagining of our place in and relationship with the whole. The theme chosen for this year's international and ecumenical celebration of the Season of Creation is 'A Home for All? Renewing the Oikos [the Household] of God', and it reflects the same kind of idea. And what I'd like us to do in the next few weeks is to explore some of the theological underpinnings of this vision, this conversion. These underpinnings, I think, have powerful implications for how we may come to know and love the world aright – implications which take us beyond even the current crisis to a renewed vocation for human being itself.

So let's start with the idea of 'home'. What is it that makes something a home – what's it like to be or to feel at home? As I reflect on this, a couple of things come to mind immediately. One is the sense of having a place (as it were) by right. When I'm at home, I'm not dependent on the hospitality of others; I'm not a guest, no matter how welcome. It's my place; no one can tell me to leave and I don't have to ask permission to be there. Home signifies belonging, stability, rest, a sense of continuity and the right to be. A second thing that strikes me is that 'home' is more than a roof over my head, more than where I happen to live. A true home has not just practical but symbolic significance. It's an embodied connection to place that enables life's flourishing. A home reflects or expresses something of who I am, and so it relates me to myself, to history (including, perhaps, to ancestors and generations to come); and it connects me to many other people and places, sometimes quite far distant.

Sometimes I like to sit in a room of our home, and gaze within and without. I look at the ornaments, pictures, furnishings, implements and at the garden outside the window, and I remember where things came from, who gave them, or what season of my or our life they're connected to. There's the fruit bowl I bought with the \$50 my Aunty Anney gave me as a housewarming present years ago and that felt like such an extravagance to buy. There's the rug I bought at an auction, bidding (terrified) for the first time, with Mum along for the ride. My grandmother's cutlery and side plates, the lighthouse lamp that Neil's Mum transported heroically in a suitcase from her home in the Channel Islands, that speaks of her spirit of adventure and extravagance. There's the plane tree we planted in our courtyard when we got back from our first Camino. On and on the web of significance extends – our home saturated with and constituted by memory, story, relationship, the 'inner life' of things and the gift of belonging in the world over time.

And if this is what a home is, then what might it mean to see the world itself as home? A place we all belong, not needing permission to be. A place saturated with and constituted by memory, story, relationship, and communicating the nature of its maker.

Enlightenment thought makes of the world an essentially meaningless conglomeration of things and processes among which we happen to exist. It's not a home so much as an 'environment'. Of course, it's possible for us to project meaning onto this 'disenchanted' scene – to invest certain places with special significance. But from an Enlightenment perspective, there's no sense that meaningful relation suffuses the nature of the world or that discerning this meaning is part of responding to what is actually there. It's different for Australia's indigenous people. In her extraordinary book on what it means to be an Aboriginal person, Arrernte elder M.K. Turner speaks of the world, of Land especially, in terms of personal identity. In her thought world, Land is embedded in a web of relationships and has its own voice, its

own story to tell.² For people to be properly related to any particular place or to the earth as a whole is to be ready to listen to its voice, to be capable of discerning and honouring the meaning Land expresses.³

Early Christian thought is much closer to M.K. Turner than it is to the Enlightenment. In the Christian vision of things, the world is essentially meaningful because it is an expression of God's goodness and self-giving love. If you listen deeply, you may hear the creative Word of God sounding through the life of the world, like a harmonic in which all things hold together. You may sense the Spirit of love suffusing it. And, on this vision, if we attend truly to the world and all that dwells therein, we will realise that we ourselves – called into being by the same Word – are intrinsically part of it. We are home.

What grounds this way of imagining the nature of things? What justifies talk of a meaningful universe and of the world as home? I'll be saying more about this next week, but for now, let me offer this. The early teachers of contemplation thought that what stops us seeing the world as it really is, recognising (in Rowan Williams' words) 'the structure of divine wisdom embodied in creation',⁴ is the distortion of our intelligence by 'passion'. And by 'passion' they meant our compulsive tendencies to look at what's there only in terms of our own needs, fantasies and fears.⁵

For these teachers, our capacity to be truly 'at home' in the world is connected to the renewing of our mind. Home-coming is what happens as human consciousness is restored to its full senses, letting go partial, grasping, self-focused way of knowing and opening to the larger truth of things, just as when the Prodigal Son finally came to his senses he was able to return home. And, according to the Christian contemplative tradition, this truer perception of the world is ultimately a

² Margaret Kemarre Turner, *Iwenhe Tyerrtye* – what it means to be an Aboriginal person (Alice Springs: IAD Press, 2010)

³ According to MK, 'If people talk rubbish-way to Land, the Land can feel it and gets very hurt'. So, she says, 'it's very important to respect the Land's sacredness. Never to treat it with disrespect, even by talking'. *Iwenhe Tyerrtye*, p.117.

⁴ Rowan Williams, *Looking East in Winter* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2021), p.22.

⁵ Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, p.17.

fruit of prayer. 'If any of you is lacking in wisdom', wrote the author of James, 'ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you ... Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights ... In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creation', which is to say capable of consciously returning the gift of our life and of all life, to the Giver.

I know that many of you have practices of loving attention to the world, and of deep listening in prayer. This week, as we begin our celebration of the Season of Creation and of the world as our home, I invite you to continue or deepen those practices. To spend some time simply gazing, listening, apprehending what's there. Don't try to project or make meaning; rather let yourself awaken to its presence. In other words, make yourself, discover yourself, at home.