

18 September 2021

Renewing (James 3. 1-18; 'God's Grandeur', Gerard Manley Hopkins)

© Sarah Bachelard

'The world is charged with the grandeur of God'. It's hard to imagine a better expression of the theological vision we've been exploring over the last couple of weeks this Season of Creation. It's a vision of the world coming forth from the vital being of God, flaming out 'like shining from shook foil', so that the created order communicates something of God's own nature – indeed, is charged with it. We've been unpacking the theme, 'A Home for All? Renewing the Oikos of God'. I've suggested we're truly 'at home' in our world to the extent we resonate with its originating vitality, and recognise something of the love and gift that underlies the world's life. We're truly 'at home' here insofar as we recognise our fellow creatures as sharers in this same gift of life, members with us of the household of God, the earth 'a home for all'.

Alas, says Gerard Manley Hopkins, this is not how we (especially in the industrialised West) have tended to live. 'Why do men then now not reckon his rod?', the poet cries; why do we not heed our proper place and relation to God and to other beings? 'Generations have trod, have trod, have trod; And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell'. Not only are we often alienated from the world around us; 'nor can foot feel, being shod'. But human activity has also profoundly affected the functioning of earth's natural systems, the balance of things. There are places where, as Hopkins says, 'the soil is bare now'; and the glaciers are melting now, the oceans acidifying. There are places where systems are so out of whack that some forms of life proliferate in, as it were, 'unnatural' ways. Introduced and feral species, human over-population and over-consumption overwhelm the capacity of earth's systems to cope.

And the question we face, given all this, starting from here, is how may the world's life be renewed? How do we relate to our common home in ways that enable genuinely **mutual** flourishing?

As I sat with this theme, what struck me first of all is a sense of wonder that 'renewal' is in fact a possibility. We're not part of a broken machine, but of a living system capable of healing, regeneration and newness. It's an astonishing feature of our world, though theologically, it makes sense that it should be like this. If it's true that the earth communicates the nature of God, then it follows, as Hopkins says, that 'nature is never spent', never exhausted: 'there *lives* the dearest freshness deep down things' because all are sourced in the irrepressible life of God. This doesn't mean we have licence to rip and tear at will. We know that living systems can be pushed past certain tipping points, such that they cannot continue operating 'normally'. Yet it remains true, that where there is life, there is hope, and the possibility of life's renewal.

Just this week, I've come across a couple of inspiring stories of the renewing of the natural world. On SBS we saw footage of urban forests growing in Karachi, Pakistan. They're being planted on parched and degraded land in the middle of this mega-city, offering habitat for birds and other animals, dramatically reducing the ambient temperature and capable of holding thousands of gallons of run-off water after rain.¹ We saw the before and after photographs – a miracle of renewal!

And there was a story in *The Monthly* magazine, about the Tasmanian devil. This small marsupial had been decimated by an epidemic of facial cancer, prompting heroic scientific efforts to create 'an insurance population of devils in zoos and wildlife sanctuaries', including on the mainland where devils once also lived. The population is now recovering and there are discussions about the possibility of reintroducing the species to the mainland. This raises its own complexities and controversy, illustrating the delicate judgements involved in discerning how to

¹ See 'Clifton Urban Forest: A game-changing green lung in the center of Karachi' <https://www.sugiproject.com/projects/clifton-urban-forest> (accessed 16 September 2021).

rebalance damaged natural systems. But a recent field study found that introducing devils to an area hugely reduced the number of feral cats, and as that happened the population of native mammals began to recover. It's hoped that Tasmanian devils may provide a unique opportunity to reset some of Australia's eco-systems 'with native carnivores and native prey, rather than overwhelmingly introduced predators'.²

I'm sure you're aware of other initiatives world-wide yielding heartening results – 'rewilding' projects, the recovery of some marine populations because of fishing quotas; organisations like Bush Heritage regenerating land and habitat, and work on recovering the health of river systems, including by our own John Williams in northern Australia. And there are thousands of local waterways, parks, gardens being brought back to vibrant life by the love and hard work of communities. What all this shows is that it is possible for the earth to regenerate, for species to recover, for life to flourish and find equilibrium again. This work of renewal calls for wisdom and patience. We don't always know how to create conditions for it, what interventions are needed and what is just about getting out of the way – giving life a chance to do what it needs. But it seems to me one of the great signs of hope in our time that such renewal is being imagined and is happening.

And this leads me to reflect on a further dimension to this hope of renewal. It's to do with the way we speak about the natural world, how we imagine our relationship to it. Some thoughts of Simone Weil, philosopher, activist and mystic, are helpful here. Weil was profoundly concerned about the treatment of workers in 1930s France. She spent time working in a Renault factory, and was appalled at how being treated as a mere cog in the industrial machine affected her and her fellow workers, how it compromised something essential to their humanity. Yet she was also highly critical of the union movement advocating on these workers' behalf – for the unionists framed the injustice of the situation merely in terms of the need for higher pay. 'Suppose', she wrote, 'the devil were bargaining for the soul of some

² Anthony Ham, 'Return of the devil', *The Monthly*, Issue 181, September 2021, p.16.

poor wretch and someone, moved by pity, should step in and say to the devil: “It is a shame for you to bid so low; the commodity is worth at least twice as much”.³ It’s not that pay scales are irrelevant. But the point is that if *this* is the only language you have for conceiving human value, then something has already been lost. The workers, she says, ‘forget that the subject of the bargain, which they complain they are being forced to sell cheap and for less than the just price, is nothing other than their soul’.

It seems to me there’s risk of a similar reductionism in the way our society characterises the value of the natural world. According to a 2010 discussion paper from the Australian Government’s environment department, scientists and policy makers are increasingly using the concept of ‘ecosystem services’.⁴ Ecosystem services are defined as ‘the mix of benefits that society obtains from our environment’, and whose ‘continued provision underpins human existence, health and prosperity’. These so called ‘services’ include such things as the production of food and water, control of climate and disease, nutrient cycles and oxygen production. There is an attempt to include non-economic value as part of the ‘service’ the environment provides – there’s talk of cultural, spiritual and recreational benefits, as well as ‘intrinsic value’. But the whole framing of the discussion seems commodifying and anthropocentric, the world’s value primarily defined in relation to what it provides ‘for us’.

I believe the motives for developing this concept are good. It’s an effort to describe the natural world so that its value can be recognised and accounted for by our economic framework. But my fear is that it concedes too much to this framework. Just as characterising the value of workers purely in terms of the price of their labour diminishes their humanity, so framing the value of the natural world in terms of its service provision to us, flattens our perception of it and distorts our

³ Simone Weil, ‘Human Personality’ in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Sian Miles (London: Virago Press, 1986), p.80.

⁴ ‘Ecosystem Services: Key Concepts and Applications’, Occasional Paper Series no. 1, © Commonwealth of Australia 2010: <https://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/b53e6002-4ea7-4108-acc8-40fff488bab7/files/ecosystem-services.pdf>

relationship to it. Such language cannot evoke wonder, or make us present to the beauty and sheer mysterious otherness of the life around us. There's a real sense in which it doesn't know what it's talking about.

The Letter of James speaks powerfully about the dangers of the misuse of the 'tongue'. 'How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire'. It's hard not to hear this literally in our day ... when you think of the forests ablaze this past summer across Europe and north America, and the year before in Australia, and their fuelling by delays to climate action due (in part, at least) to the misuse of the tongue – lies and conspiracy theories peddled by certain corporations, politicians and media outlets.

What I'm suggesting is that the right use of the tongue, of human speech, is not just about the issue of falsehood. It also encompasses the adequacy of the concepts we use to express the meaning of things. It involves being aware of how our words, images and rhythms of speech evoke or deny the fullness of reality, how they make us present or not, related or not. And this suggests that the language of poetry, worship, art, photography, music and dance is not just ornamental or decorative, not just some dispensable overlaying of the 'hard' descriptions of economics and science. It is rather absolutely necessary if we are truly to connect and reconnect to the life in which we share. It plays as vital a part in renewing the world and our relationship to it, as the knowledge and wisdom of science, and the dedication of conservationists.

'The world is charged with the grandeur of God; it will flame out like shining from shook foil'. These are words that bless the earth. Once you've been helped to see it this way, then honour, celebration and reverence follow. So too then may our words of praise and thanksgiving participate in the renewing of the household of God.