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The Oikos of God (James 4.13 – 5.11)

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Throughout this Season of Creation, the New Testament readings suggested by the lectionary have come from the Letter of James. You may have noticed that the connection between these texts and the themes we've been exploring has been – what shall I say? Somewhat tenuous? Oblique? What the ...? After all, James is not directly concerned with our human relationship to the natural world – he doesn't express ecological concern or even particular love and gratitude for creation. He just takes it for granted, as he draws on it metaphorically to describe the human situation. One who doubts, he says in Chapter 1, is 'like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind' (1.6); the rich 'will disappear like a flower in the field ... in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away' (1.10-11); the unbridled tongue is like 'a fire' that 'sets on fire the cycle of nature' (3.6); and one who is patient is like the farmer who 'waits for the precious crop from the earth ... until it receives the early and the late rains' (5.7). Natural images saturate James' language and his thought. But, for obvious reasons, it never occurs to him that the life of the world itself could be imperilled by human behaviour, and so his concern is not directly for it.

Why, then, have we been reading him over these weeks? Well, despite the lack of fit at times (and I did look for other readings!!), I couldn't help feeling there was a connection. Our theme, 'A Home for All? Renewing the Oikos of God' is about what it means to share the life of earth, to relate to all creatures as members with us of the 'household' of God. James' focus is on Christian communities rather than the world as a whole. But he too is concerned with what it means to be sharers in one life, including with those you might have thought not really like you, not deserving of the same honour and consideration. And I'm interested in what we might learn from this parallel.

Scholars differ about the authorship and intended audience of James. It's generally considered one of the earliest texts in the New Testament, but whether it's addressed to particular communities or is more a generic collection of 'wisdom' sayings drawn from Jesus' teaching isn't entirely clear. What is clear is its intention to communicate a new culture, to encourage a particular kind of relatedness among members of the household of faith, in accordance with the nature of God. Commentator A.K.M. Adam writes that 'throughout the letter, James drives toward the point that our theological integrity — our whole-hearted, consistent, comprehensive devotion to God — requires of us a particular kind of life and character'. According to James: 'As God ... brought us into being in an act of perfectly free giving, so we — "a kind of first fruits of his creatures" — display God's own changeless goodness and generosity by truthfulness, humility, gratitude, patience, steadfastness, and generous provision for those who depend on us'.¹

So James exhorts his hearers not to be double-minded, saying one thing and doing another, not to be run by habits of unredeemed human sociality — the rich exploiting the poor, the arrogant dishonouring the vulnerable and dispossessed. He encourages perseverance in goodness even amidst suffering because, he insists, compassion and mercy are at the root of reality. 'James urges us to live in ways congruent with our cosmic origins in God and truth', writes Adam, and in practice this means such things as caring for orphans and widows, not despising 'a poor person in dirty clothes' (2.2), not grumbling about one another, but really fulfilling what James calls 'the royal law according to scripture, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself"' (2.8). And if, for James, this is how Christians are to relate within the human household of God, we've been exploring what it could mean to relate to the whole of creation in the same spirit. Conceiving of the natural world and her creatures, as well as fellow human beings, as neighbour — all life calling forth our reverence and honour, even the lowliest given place in a web of mutual flourishing.

¹ A.K.M. Adam, 'Commentary on James 1. 17-27', <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-22-2/commentary-on-james-117-27-4>

As a big picture, this vision of the world and ourselves in relation to it seems wonderful and eminently desirable. But over the past few weeks, particularly in conversations many of us have joined after the service, we've grappled with some of its grittier implications. For one thing, it must be asked whether an ideal of mutual flourishing for all creation, founded in the love and life of God, is actually true to the way things are. Violence and destruction seem built into the life of the world. We see volcanoes in the Canary Islands and earthquakes closer to home, inherent patterns of predation, extinction, suffering, disease. Meryl wrote a prayer she shared with me this week which begins: 'God who created all, some of which seems at odds with your very nature'. Is the whole idea of our world as a potentially harmonious household sentimental, a false premise and promise? James exhorts his readers to continue trusting patiently in God's goodness and, by implication, in the goodness of creation, despite suffering and un-fulfilment. But can we accept this?

And even if, by faith, we do, there remain profoundly difficult questions about what then it means to participate faithfully and responsibly in such a 'household' – where the interests of some members cannot apparently be reconciled with others. What are we to do about managing or eliminating feral species, for example? How are forests and rivers systems to be regenerated while the needs of human food production and shelter are also met? What level of human consumption, including of animals and animal products, is consistent with reverence for the life of all? There aren't easy answers.

For James, the guide to conduct that reflects the being of God and so relates us rightly to our neighbour is 'the law'. This law is summarised, as we've already seen, by the call to 'love your neighbour as yourself', and for James it includes the commandments of the Torah, the Jewish law. This, as with the law of indigenous and other spiritual traditions, is all about safeguarding the well-being of the 'oikos' at every level – familial, communal, cosmic. It doesn't tell you how it's applied in every complex circumstance, but it offers a framework for discerning action, in part by specifying limits necessary to sustain the sharing of life in common. Obeying this law involves disciplining what might otherwise be unchecked impulses and selfish desires

that, says James, 'give birth to sin ... [which] when it is fully grown, gives birth to death' (1.15). As when the unfettered greed of the rich defrauds labourers of their wages, and this excess of wealth ends up no use to anyone, rotten and moth-eaten.

Interestingly, the notion of a 'law of the household' is the root of our word 'economy': 'oikos' for household and 'nomos' for law. It seems particularly ironic, then, that the modern Western field of 'economics' has had built into *its* so-called 'laws' a refusal to set limits on greed, consumption and excessive accumulation. Because of this, rather than conducing to the flourishing of the whole, the neo-liberal law of our society's household has tended to undermine sharedness of life, especially with the natural world. In fact, our whole economic framework has been built on a fiction of separation – the natural world conceived as an 'externality' to economic activity. As Kate Raworth point outs, in her brilliant analysis of 20th century economic theory, the assumption has been that the earth is an inexhaustible resource, 'so take what you want'.²

Some have traced the roots of this modern Western arrogance back to the Scriptural claim that humanity is given 'dominion' over the earth, and no doubt this notion has licenced exploitation at times. But, as Pope Francis points out in his encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*, we must forcefully reject the equation of 'dominion' and 'domination'. The emphasis of the relevant biblical passage, the pope writes, is on 'tilling' and 'keeping' the earth, which means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. It implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature.³

And as Neil said in a reflection at St Ninian's recently, this interpretation is consistent with Scripture's placing of a range of limits on human use of the earth's gifts. The Torah is all about the right ordering of common life, and includes frequent warnings against pride, greed, and covetousness, along with exhortations to be merciful, hospitable, reverent, thankful, generous. Sabbath instructions direct the

² Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist* (London: Random House, 2017), p.70.

³ *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Australian edition (Strathfield: St Paul's Publications, 2015), p.59.

honouring of rhythms of work and rest – not just for human beings, but for land and animals too. Other instructions prescribe what can be taken from the fields, what must be offered as a tithe, and what must be left for the poor and alien to glean. There are limits on lending, indentured labour and ownership; the laws of Jubilee allow for resetting the economic framework every 50 years, so as to avoid the injustice of an ever-widening gap between haves and have nots. All this serves to flesh out a law of the household, an ‘economy’, designed to limit tendencies to rapacious exploitation and sustain the well-being of the whole. Whether or not it ever actually worked like that, the desire of God for holistic justice is clear.

So, where does this leave us? For all the dangers of sentimentality in conceiving ourselves as members of one ‘household’ with all creation – it still seems to me the truest vision we have. This doesn’t smooth out all competition or conflict between life forms. The world is not designed around our agenda and there’s not always an easy harmony of interests. But the truth is that we inhabit a relational universe, sourced in a relational God. And this means we cannot live rightly by standing apart from or over against the rest of life. We must discover our place within it, acknowledging the needs and limits of the other-than-human world, and exercising the capacities and gifts of our creaturehood in service of all.

What might a law, an economy, for this kind of household look like? Thanks to a new generation of economists, like Kate Raworth, a sense of it is emerging – regenerative and distributive by design, embedded in and responsive to the natural world, committed to creating conditions for ‘a thriving balance’ and a ‘safe and just space for all’.⁴ As for the spirit that underpins this economy? I think it is nourished by listening – tuning in to the subtle dimensions of the world’s life and the echoes of the Word at its Source, seeking the ‘hidden wholeness’ in finitude. It calls for reverence – disciplining our ‘unruly wills and desires’ so to enlarge the space in which all life may flourish. Responsibility – facing up to the damage our actions have wrought, and discerning wisely and patiently what remedies might be possible. Compassion –

⁴ Raworth, *Doughnut Economics*, pp.25-30.

being present to the tears of things and our own, and somehow continuing to trust in goodness and share what we have. And it involves praise – delighting in the sheer given-ness of life, and singing it back, magnifying love in wonder and gratitude. As we learn to participate in *this* economy of creaturely life, so may the *oikos* of God be renewed, and the earth be a home for all.