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**Let Justice and Peace Flow (Amos 5. 6-7, 10-12, 21-24)**

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Once more, we're embarking on the liturgical observance of the Season of Creation. This season, which runs from September 1 until the Feast of St Francis on October 4, is marked by all major Christian denominations and, for those of us in the southern hemisphere, coincides fittingly with the advent of Spring. It's a liturgical Season which, in this time of profound ecological crisis, calls us to action as well as prayer, to a transformation of lifestyle as well as of consciousness.

This year's theme for the Season of Creation is 'Let Justice and Peace Flow'. Its symbol is a river. This language, this metaphor, arises – as we've just heard – from the words of the prophet Amos, recorded from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE: 'let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Amos 5.24). Significantly, then, this theme explicitly connects environmental to social justice. Where once it might have seemed possible (at least in our culture) to treat these two dimensions of life on earth as separate issues, it's now more and more obvious that was an illusion. Loss of biodiversity and a changing climate are already profoundly affecting the quality of life of poor and vulnerable communities, as well as the prospects of future generations. They will increasingly affect us all.

Food security, access to safe water, habitable land and temperature ranges – all are under unprecedented and urgent threat. Thus, the international organising committee for this year's Season of Creation writes: 'we are called to join the mighty river of justice and peace on behalf of all Creation, to take up climate and ecological justice, and to speak out with and for communities most impacted by climate injustice and the loss of biodiversity'. As Pope Francis expressed it in his ground-breaking 2015 encyclical letter, *Laudato Si'*: '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'.<sup>1</sup>

All this is well-known, I believe, to most of us. As are two connected lines of thought we've explored over the years at Benedictus. The first is that in the background of our complex crisis is what Rowan Williams calls 'a crisis of what we understand by our humanity'.<sup>2</sup> We have, he suggests, largely lost a sense of our own 'creatureliness'. The Pope remarks that we so easily regard 'nature' as 'something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live'.<sup>3</sup> But we too are natural creatures, connected to and dependent upon the whole. When we forget this, we act in profoundly self and other-sabotaging 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'.<sup>5</sup> Increasingly we treat ourselves and others like machines, undermining the intrinsic dignity of both work and rest. There's distortion too in our relationship with the passage of time which has become commodified. We're so anxious about wasting or losing time that, Williams points out, speed of communication has become almost a good in itself, not to mention fast food and speed dating. As a consequence, we struggle to 'find' time for the very old and the very young, or have patience with the slow unfolding of natural processes. And this is part of a more general impatience with any kind of limit, including to our habits of consumption.<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis insists, as long as we're alienated from ourselves, we will remain alienated from the world around us: 'there can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology', he says. 'There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself'.<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, and this is a second line of thought we've previously explored at Benedictus, what's required to comprehend and respond to the full scope of the

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, An Encyclical Letter on Ecology and Climate, Australian edition (Strathfield: St Paul's Publications, 2015), p.114.

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Climate crisis: fashioning a Christian response' in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp.196-207, p.200.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, p.114.

socio-ecological crisis we've generated is not just a series of technological solutions, but a conversion in our ways of being and relating and knowing. Australian political scientist Robert Manne perceptively brought out what's at stake here in a discussion of the difference between Al Gore and Pope Francis on the climate crisis.

According to Manne, Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth*, implied that the crisis we're facing has arisen 'as a consequence of an unhappy but nevertheless innocent accident'. We couldn't have known that the 'unprecedented material prosperity of industrial civilisation' based on the burning of fossil fuels would have such adverse side-effects. Now that we know this, on Gore's account, all that's required to overcome the crisis is to replace fossil fuels with renewables. He doesn't suggest this will be easy. Nevertheless, following the necessary transition 'the fundamental human story – of expanding material prosperity through endless economic growth' can simply go on as before: for Gore, 'the myth of unending material progress ... [remains] untouched'.<sup>4</sup>

The papal encyclical, however, is different. It agrees with Gore on the urgent need to phase out fossil fuels, but parts company 'over the relation of the climate crisis to contemporary industrial civilisation'. Manne writes: 'For Gore the fundamentals of this civilisation are unquestioned. For Pope Francis the climate crisis is only the most extreme expression of a destructive tendency that has become increasingly dominant through the course of industrialisation'. The Pope doesn't diminish the great goods have been achieved by technological advances. But it's the mindset accompanying these advances that, he insists, has so often been destructive. There's been a loss of awe, wonder and proper reverence for our common home, and 'the treatment of the Earth as a resource to be mastered and exploited'. Indeed, for the Pope 'the limitless appetite for consumption that has accelerated during the past 200 years of the industrial age and has culminated in our "throwaway culture" ... are part of a general and profound civilizational malaise'.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Manne, "'Laudato Si'": A political reading', *The Monthly*, July 1, 2015.

Addressing this malaise calls for a collective kind of repentance, a metanoia, a radical reimagining of who and how we are in a world of gift and limit.

And I can't help feeling there's a connection in all this to the process that we in Australia are currently embarked upon, responding to the invitation to come into a new relationship with the First Peoples of this land through constitutional recognition and a First Nations' Voice to Parliament. This too calls for a kind of conversion. It too involves acknowledging a history of injustice and its impacts; and confronts us with the same habits of alienation, the same refusal to see ourselves belonging to and accountable for the well-being of the whole which characterises our culture's relationship with the natural world.

The prophet Amos called the people of his time and place to repent of their self-sabotaging ways, truly to see the contradiction they were living – thinking they could worship God while the poor were trampled and the needy pushed aside, thinking they could seek their own good without regard to the life of all. Repentance, it seems, is never easy. And yet there is a clear vision of an alternative world if only we could break through.

Amos imagines a torrent of goodness just waiting to be unleashed, justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. We get glimpses of what this might look and feel like, even now. I think of the extraordinary capacity of the natural world to regenerate and heal if only it's given a chance. I think of the possibility of Australians growing into a totally new relationship to our country by learning from indigenous ways of being and knowing, and beginning to co-create a reconciled future.

Hear again the invitation of this Season of Creation 'to join the mighty river of justice and peace on behalf of all Creation'. This is 'the river of God'. We are called to participate in strengthening its flow, unblocking its channels that, in the words of Pope Francis, our common home may overflow with life once again and all the earth rejoice. How we might accept this invitation – imaginatively, spiritually, practically – will be our focus in coming weeks.