

Birthing and bearing the new creation

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 26 September, 2021

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Creation 4. Mountain Sunday.

Psalm 48: 1-11; Isaiah 65: 17-25; Romans 8: 31-38.

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

One of my favourite contemporary spiritual songs is that which we heard before the beginning of our worship today – ‘*I Am Mountain*’ by Gungor. The lyrics are evocative of both rich ancient understandings and the best insights of modern life and science. They speak of profound presence, of the immanence and transcendence of the divine. They direct us to the heart of the life-giving spirituality of this Season of Creation. For, in Gungor's words, and ancient Christian orthodoxy proclaims, ‘there’s glory’ (‘beauty’ and ‘mystery’) in the dirt.’ As Christian, and other mystics, have affirmed, there’s ‘a universe within the sand, eternity within’ a human being. Often, we may indeed feel ourselves to be ‘wandering in skin and soul/ Searching, longing for a home’. Yet in truth, in memorable phrases, we are invited to see ourselves as:

*Momentary carbon stories
From the ashes
Filled with holy ghost*

In the face of the climate emergency, we are also called, by ‘the light’, to ‘fight, fight for our lives’ - as we have also explored, particularly in last week’s reflections and discussions. However, above all, we are encouraged to acknowledge more deeply the wonder of the divine existence we share. For we are intimately related to our extraordinary world. All metaphors, as Gungor says, then begin to break down in the face of this astounding mystery and reality, as:

*Life is here now
Breathe it all in
Let it all go
You are earth and wind...*

How well do we know this mysterious reality of our being and becoming? Gungor, in a contemporary manner, has helped capture what others, like Francis of Assisi, have also experienced within the best of our faith traditions. Indeed, not for nothing does the ecumenical Season of Creation conclude on St Francis’ feast day, on 4 October, for it is into this kind of ecstatic earthed spirituality that we are called. In the best sense of the word, it is truly charismatic, filled with the spirit dancing through us and through all of Creation. Stephanie Dowrick also put it so beautifully this week, during one of our Pitt Street morning prayers. Where, she said, does air end, and sky begin? In fact, there is no end of air, or beginning of sky. Air is in us and so sky is in us. We are one, though, in diverse ways, we reflect the glory and beauty of Creation.

How are we going in knowing ourselves as '*momentary carbon stories... filled with holy ghost*'? How, like Francis of Assisi, do we learn to dance more freely, as 'earth and wind', fire and water? For, in Gungor's words, we too 'are ocean, we are mist': we are 'brilliant fools who wound' as well as kiss. Alongside the need to 'fight, fight for our lives' and our planet, the answer surely lies - doesn't it? - in deeper, more attentive, spirituality practice and understanding. Certainly that is a powerful, and profound, aspect of the ecological movement over recent decades. It has been, and will continue to be, expressed in a multiplicity of ways, creating new and re-creating old patterns. Not least, it draws us all to learn more deeply from the wisdom of First Nations peoples: for, in many ways, this is the nearest language we have to the Earth speaking for herself. This is a deep discourse too of ecstatic earthed spirituality: charismatically reflecting and embodying the life of earth, wind, fire and water more broadly; embodied as much in lore and practice, dance, art, and action, as in mere words themselves.

Well, I can hardly speak, except indirectly, of such ecstatic earthed spirituality as it arises from the ground of this particular land. Yet it is my sense that such spirituality can touch us all, precisely because it speaks to the intimate relationship we all have, as children of Earth. As indicated earlier, it also brings to fresh life aspects of all the great wisdom traditions of the Earth.

'I Am Mountain' sang Gungor. Is this really so far from the several 'I Am' sayings of Jesus? Of course, those Gospel words 'I Am' are closely related to the Hebrew understanding of God as 'I am who I am'. Much conventional received Christian orthodoxy has thus sought to emphasise Jesus' 'I Am' sayings as conveying the transcendent mystery of the divine within his being, reflecting a gap between Jesus and the rest of humanity. Jesus, one might say, would have been entitled to say 'I Am Mountain', offering us a metaphor of the embodiment of Mount Zion, and other holy mountains. Can we however really claim the same? My sense is that we can, if not in degree, then certainly in kind. It is not for nothing that our Christian, and many other spiritual, and poetic, traditions are full of similar metaphors, as expressions of the intimate relationship we share with all of existence, and with 'I am that I am' in Godself.

Of what 'I Am' sayings in our wisdom traditions can you think? As a child of Celtic inheritance, I am aware of a rich stream of such expressions within Celtic spirituality, often born of ecstatic earthed experience of the divine 'in the dirt'. Not for nothing therefore it is sometimes offered as one possible partner with First Nations' spirituality in dancing with the spirit of all Creation. Many of us are aware of some particular Celtic emphases: including an awareness of the 'sacramentality' of Creation; the importance of contemplative awareness; of the affirmation of Creation; and the interwoven complexity of time.

The Celtic understanding of time is perhaps particularly significant in this. For Celtic ideas of time are not about rushing against the clock, like modern Western thinking. Rather time has a sacred dimension. God also, as it were, created plenty of time. What matters is how we live in and with it. Furthermore, past, present and future are integrally connected. For time is not merely chronological (one thing after another) in the 'Celtic Imagination'. Instead, time is a sacred gift and expression of what might be termed the Eternal Now God, whose name is always 'I Am'. How much closer is this to other ancient wisdom than modern thinking?! Indeed, as scholars point out, the word translated as 'I Am' in the Hebrew Scriptures, can equally well be translated as 'I will be what I will be', 'I will become what I will become', 'I create what(ever) I create', or simply 'the Existing One'. Past present and future, all in one right now, then and to come!

Such understandings are most helpful when we approach today's great readings from Isaiah chapter 65 (verses 17-25) and the end of the Letter to the Romans 8.31-38. For these make little full sense without understanding them as visions of the work of the Eternal Now God. For they are not about some ideal future, but about the 'everywhen'. They are not about some distant mountain or other place, but about the now and always. They are not about what it is hoped God will bring into being, but about what God is already doing and, indeed, has already done. In other words, the new earth and the new heaven is right now, and not just to be revealed. The birthing and bearing of new creation has happened, and is happening right now.

This week, after Bishop John Shelby Spong's passing, a number of people have shared some of the impact he had upon us and others. I hope we will continue to do so, and also together perhaps arrange a special event next year. One of the most striking stories is that of Anthony Venn-Brown, one of Sydney's great LGBT+ Christian elders. In 2007, he said, he came to listen to Bishop Spong in Pitt Street and, at the end of the main address, he asked the bishop a question about what could possibly be done about LGBT+ liberation in the Churches. Jack Spong's response was striking and transformative. "*Once the question is asked, the debate is over. Walk in the victory.*" It is a deep truth and it applies to many other issues too.

Sometimes, in our struggles for sustainable life and our care of Creation, we can become quite despondent. The goodness of God's Creation in Genesis chapter 1, which we reflected upon last week, can seem so distant. The vision of cosmic harmony we hear about today in Isaiah chapter 65 can seem so far away. Yet, like God's word from last week in Jeremiah that 'I will not make an end' is one of great hope. That is at the heart of Paul's words in today's passage from the Letter to the Romans. It is not just that God will not make an end, or that the vision of harmony lies ahead. It is also present with us now, in the very groanings of Creation in which we are caught up. For, as the New Testament proclaims again and again, in Christ the victory has actually been won. The questions of sustainability have been, and continue to be asked. Therefore, picking up Spong's words, even in the midst of our sufferings, and those of the wider Creation, let us therefore walk on in victory.

Saint Paul is an interesting figure, isn't he? He and his writings have been used for much good, and also quite disastrously. This reflects the mixed nature of the man and his writings. In this passage from Romans, I think we see some of the mystic in Paul. Like many ancient Celtic and other mystics, he is caught up in the ecstatic experience of God in Creation. He sees the Eternal Now, God as I Am and the I Will Become, and he calls us into sharing in that mystery too. Like Francis of Assisi, like Gungor, he calls us not simply to dance with the spirit of Creation, but to know ourselves as an intimate part and expression of it. Even in our sufferings, and the wider groanings of Creation, we can know and display God's victory. In doing so, we both help to birth and bear the new creation.

There is so much more we could explore about the mountain as a sacred symbol of God and the sacred journey to God. As St Paul would readily agree, climbing, for example, can be arduous and testing. Yet we need also to receive the mountain as a gift, and as part of us, as part of the divine. Let me then conclude with two more of my favourite invitations to share in the mystic dance of Creation. Perhaps you have your own to share? The first is from *The Song of Amergin* from the *Book of Leinster*, translated from the Gaelic:

*I am Wind on Sea,
I am Ocean-wave,
I am Roar of Sea,
I am Bull of Seven Fights,
I am Vulture on Cliff,
I am Dewdrop,
I am Fairest of Flowers,
I am Boar for Boldness,
I am Salmon in Pool,
I am Lake on Plain,
I am a Mountain in a Human Being,
I am a Word of Skill,
I am the Point of a Weapon
I am God who fashions Fire for a Head.
Who smooths the ruggedness of a mountain?*

The second "I am" poem is from the great Sufi poet Jelaluddin Rumi, speaking of the essential mystical unity of all:

*I am dust particles in sunlight.
I am the round sun.*

*To the bits of dust I say, Stay.
To the sun I say, Keep moving.*

*I am morning mist,
and the breathing of evening.*

*I am wind in the top of a grove,
and surf on the cliff.*

*Mast, rudder, helmsman, and keel,
I am also the coral reef they founder on.*

*I am a tree with a trained parrot in its branches.
Silence, thought, and voice.*

*The musical air coming through a flute,
a spark of a stone, a flickering
in metal. Both candle,
and the moth crazy around it.*

*Rose, and the nightingale
lost in the fragrance.*

*I am all orders of being, the circling galaxy,
the evolutionary intelligence, the lift,*

*and the falling away. What is, what isn't.
You who know Jelaluddin,*

*You the one in all, say who I am.
Say I am You.*

I, You, and all things, in the mystery of God, are Mountain, Amen.