But who will speak for the earth?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 8 September 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 16B; Creation 2

James 2: 1-10 and 14-17; Mark 7: 24-37

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

I invite us today to reflect on three things: on the divine justice we are called to share, on who are the children of mother Earth, and on who or what is treated as deaf and mute. Let me begin however with a song. For songs are among the abiding things I carry from the political activism of my teenage and young adult years. Not least these words:

The Land! The Land! 'Twas God that made the Land.

The Land! The Land! The ground on which we stand,

Why should we be beggars with the ballot in our hand?

God made the Land for the people…

That is the chorus of '*The Land*' song, deeply associated with the British radical traditions in which I grew up, and it is still sung, where I learned it, in particular raucous party political gatherings. [i] It originates from the USA as a protest song, but, above all, it became a British radical anthem. This began in 1909, with David Lloyd George's '*People's Budget*', which introduced revolutionary unprecedented taxes on the lands and incomes of the wealthy in order to fund pioneering social welfare programs. Indeed, that budget was, in Lloyd George's own words, metaphorically '*a war budget… for raising money to wage implacable warfare against poverty and squalidness*.'

Not surprisingly, it was bitterly resisted, not least by the unelected, Tory dominated, House of Lords in Parliament. This issued in a constitutional crisis, with two general elections in one year, and the eventual removal of the veto of the House of Lords over legislation. The Land song is remembered for all of that, and for the continuing vision of a different kind of world, built on democratic will, reclaiming land and resources from the rich, and freedom and justice for all. Recently of course, the song's God references may seem odd to many. Yet, biblically speaking, they also go to the heart of the divine covenant, and to the call for justice, for land and people, that resounds out of it.

Now it is possible to water that covenant down – a little like '*The Man That Waters the Workers' Beer*', to quote one of other political songs I learned in my youth. The New Testament is also less clear than the Hebrew texts about the importance of land, so that Christianity has sadly often been turned into a highly personal salvation-scheme, or after-life insurance, for particular 'chosen' individuals. Yet, despite such evasions, God, Land, People are three inextricably linked elements in the biblical covenant.

As God says, in the key contexts of both Exodus and Exile, where the divine-human covenantal relationship is forged: '*You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your forebears, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God*.' God, Land, People: these are indivisible.

How we view and use land is therefore not just a political but a profoundly theological question. If the continuing pain of the Middle East were not enough, or First Nations' cries, the Bible is clear that the central significance of land is related to our conceptions of the sacred. This is unavoidable if we take the Bible seriously, and it is intimately linked both to the healing of Christ in our Gospel reading today and to the vital insistence on justice-seeking in our reading from the letter of James. For the salvation of Christ is not only holistic, as related to human life, but it is also ecological and cosmic. It relates to the whole of the divine life of Creation, and, not least, to the land on which we stand. In this worldwide Season of Creation, and in response to our readings, let me therefore suggest three particular aspects we might take up.

Firstly, justice for all creatures. This morning's first reading is from the letter of James, which, significantly, is one of the Bible's most marginal books. I say that, as, historically, James not only just squeaked into the list of the now canonical books agreed in the early Church. It was also famously described as '*an epistle of straw'* by the great Reformation theologian Martin Luther. For, as with Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation, Luther felt James to be of lesser value than other scriptures. For James does not mention central features of Christian Faith such as Christ's death and resurrection, and it places emphasis on human 'works' which can distract from the understanding that we are saved, or justified, by faith alone, through God's grace alone. Indeed, Luther is also reported as saying once: '*I almost feel like throwing Jimmy in the stove, as the priest at Kalenberg did.'*

Looking more closely at Luther's own thought and context however, we are drawn into a deeper understanding and better balance of the relationship between faith and grace and human works. [ii] Thus Luther's reference to the priest of Kalenberg relates to how, when short of firewood, the priest did throw James, with some other books, on the fire. This, however, was in order to provide warmth for a visiting duchess and her female attendants on a bitterly cold day: a rather practical expression indeed of James' own encouragement to love our neighbour rather than narrow religiosity!

Like Luther, even if we consider James not to be one of the 'chief books' of the Bible, we do need to hear and act upon it. For, as Luther himself put it, '*I praise it and consider it a good book, because it sets up no human doctrines but vigorously promulgates the law of God*.' The law of God may not be enough, but true faith does not stand in opposition to good works. Rather, as Jean Calvin and our Reformed inheritance has strongly affirmed, good works are signs of the vitality of faith and of divine grace working in us.

The theme of this year's ecumenical 'Season of Creation' picks this up. We are '*To Hope and Act with Creation*.' Looking only at human mistakes and capabilities we are easily plunged into despair about the state of the planet. Yet only placing hope in God - without action is, as James puts it, to make faith 'dead'. James 2. 15-17 is thus a direct challenge to us in a climate challenged world. It is simply not enough to send our '*thoughts and prayers'* to those who are suffering. Rather, faith itself requires that we act, or we betray faith itself and fail to share in God's love for all of creation.

Secondly, if, like the letter of James, we genuinely seek God's justice, we are then called into seeing and supporting the flourishing of the marginalised children of the Earth. This is core to our Gospel reading today, in the challenging story of Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman and the healing of her daughter.

Much could be said about this. We do not, for example, have to be keen womanist or post-colonial theologians, to see powerful issues of racism, sexism, and colonialism in this story. Even if Jesus is somehow personally extricated from these things, Jesus' response highlights the power and systemic violence inflicted on the marginalised and despised of his day. For we are deeply challenged – aren't we? - by Jesus' initial stark rejection of the woman, and, above all, Jesus' use of the word 'dogs' to apply to her and her people. This leads us into much deeper conversations, closely linked to the 'Listening to Country' gatherings we have held this year, the last of which Nathan Tyson will lead us into this afternoon.

For the moment however, I would also suggest we might reflect upon the woman as the Earth itself, and as what Aboriginal people call Country, and what Judaeo-Christian theology calls Sophia, or Wisdom. For where do we see the Earth, Country, Sophia/Wisdom, calling out to us today for healing for her children? Like Jesus initially in that story, are we to dismiss her, her children, her needs and value? Or how might we shift our perspectives and priorities, and work with her, and all that has been unjustly and destructively marginalised?

Now, from my early political years, not least my experience of Margaret Thatcher, I have never believed that women, as such, are somehow greater saviours than men, or, indeed, that other ethnicities are, as such, somehow nobler than those of us who have shown ourselves to be such destructive whitefellas. However, it is surely the case that hope for our planet lies with recognising the traditionally marginalised, and acting with them for the healing of all.

Thus, as a woman and a mother, the Syro-Phoenician woman also represents those women around the world who bring hope when they and their gifts are genuinely recognised. Whereas men, especially Westerners, often see biodiversity as something to be exploited, or at least only to be managed, many women in our world show us other ways: gathering herbs for healing, wood for humble shelters and sustainable food, with deep commitment to protecting and nurturing. The rising of such women continues to be a sign of hope and encouragement to action.

Thirdly, alongside James' call for justice for all, and the challenge of the Syro-Phoenician woman, we are called to centre the deaf and the mute, as in the second part of our Gospel reading today. Again, there is so much more to be said about this story, particularly in relation to disability issues. In the context of this Season of Creation however, we might fruitfully ask who and what are the deaf and mute among and around us today, particularly in other-than-human existence.

When I ministered in Toowoomba, I vividly remember my excellent Catholic social justice colleague, Mark Copland, speaking about this, in regard to environmental struggles in our region of western Queensland, not least those involving mining applications. Typically, Mark would say, formal inquiries would centre on the resource claims of mining and other 'development' companies, on the plans of State, Federal, and local Governments, and the demanding efforts of local people to have their own voices and needs recognised and heard.

However, Mark would say, '*who speaks for the Earth itself*?' To be fair, sometimes environmental assessments do offer helpful and insightful input. Occasionally, recognised traditional owners and other Aboriginal voices are also raised, and even heard. Generally however, too many environmental decisions seem to be taken with barely a cursory glance or whisper towards the land itself. Too often, Earth itself, remains deaf and mute. Country, as Aboriginal people know it, is ignored.

This brings me back to where I started: to *The Land* song. For, whilst I am still happy to sing it on appropriate occasions, as witness to past struggles, the words do not really satisfy me today. Did God, I want to ask, really make the land '*for the people'*, or '*the people for the land'*? Is divine justice, healing, and renewing creation, really about human beings or about all of existence?

Should we not be listening to First Nations peoples, as the deafened and muted voices of the land, of Country? Should we not be learning that we live, or perish, in intimate symbiosis with the land, with Country? - looking to land, to Country, to renew our hope and inspire us to act?

In this, to re-coin Lloyd George's words, we still need a war budget: but not one for humans alone, never mind one like those we see in places like Israel and Russia.

Rather, we need a budget to wage war on environmental destruction and associated poverty, with new songs which breathe new life into those who work for justice, healing, and flourishing today, and people of renewed faith and action.

In the name of holy Wisdom, embodied in Country. Amen.

[i] See further Andrew Whitehead at https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/democracy/the-land-song/

[ii] See Martin Ford's reflections at The "Epistle of Straw": Reflections on Luther and the Epistle of James - The Gospel Coalition