

St Matthew in the City, September 8, 2019

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Jer 18:1-11

Luke 14:25-33

These are challenging scriptures today.

From Jeremiah: I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you.

And from Luke:

you must hate your mother and father

You must give away all your possessions to the poor.

You must count the cost.

Well, really!!

I could, I suppose have just decided I was talking about Spring and Creation, and ignored them, but the readings are of course strangely resonant with our present predicament.

We are seeking, today, in this season of Creation, not only solutions around our climate, but also meaning in creation.

The role of faith, of theology, is to reconnect us with nature. To read the signs of nature. I think we can all feel the buoyancy of Spring as it gives birth to new life. But creation may be signaling something deeper as well.

Creation, emergency, catastrophe, crisis are now all said together, in the same breath.

Indeed at Synod in the last few days not just one but two motions were passed on climate change and carbon neutrality.

Someone in Britain said recently that it feels as though we/they are sleepwalking into disaster, just like they did in 1914, seeing the disaster that is ahead, but unable to change it or do anything about it. Multitudes of men & women working feverishly but to what end. It really is as though the potter is at work, and the clay is slipping out of our control, as though someone else is moving the wheel. Not us!

As we commemorate the end of the first world war and the beginning of the second it is worth looking at some of the ways in

which modern prophecy and poetry have together given voice to the premonition of disaster. A catastrophe and a sense of peril similar to that we now feel around climate.

A hundred years ago, just after the first world war Yeats wrote this poem (The Second Coming)

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity. . . .*

How did he know, a hundred years ago?

200 years ago as Napoleon wrecked havoc in Europe

Schleiermacher wrote:

*Great Forces of destiny are stomping about our neighbourhood,  
with steps that make the earth tremble; and we know not how they  
will draw us in.*

We know not how they will draw us in.

And before the first world war also we get the Scream, or Shriek by Edvard Munch from 1893. He describes it like this:

*I was walking along the road with two friends – the sun was setting – suddenly the sky turned blood red – I paused, feeling exhausted, and leaned on the fence – there was blood and tongues of fire above the blue-black fjord and the city – my friends walked on, and I stood there trembling with anxiety – and I sensed an infinite scream passing through nature.*

I was living near New York for a year in 2012 when the MOMA had an exhibition. I found myself drawn back to it over and over again.

What is common in all these expressions of unease, or disease, is the connection between nature and humans, nature resonates with our psychic health as well as responding to the results of human

exploitation. If we are sensitive we hear and feel the earth tremble, or scream, as much as we sense its joy and new life.

For ancient Hebrews something similar was happening as they too faced a conqueror and the humiliation of deportation, and the sack of their sacred city, and with all this a loss of meaning. They took everything what we would call personally. I am shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. That is, God.

But equally ancient Hebrews as far as we can understand also believed that God was up close and personal with nature. For Jeremiah God's Spirit was so close to nature that they were almost one. Where we might talk in terms of scientific objectivity. We might say; Nature or Gaia will pay us back, they would say: I am a potter plotting evil against you. There is not much difference really. We too fear at times that the potter is not on our side.

We are not facing anything entirely new. Just old trajectories re-traced. Although, as Yeats so profoundly says, there appears to be a widening gyre. We are retracing old patterns but the stakes keep being ratcheted up.

A few stories show the consequences of abusing or not heeding nature. The young Czech couple who decided to walk the Routeburn in Winter, without proper provision, guides, or permission. They made mistakes and one of them died. There are limits to how far a human can go to survive cold and ice, snow and wind without proper protection. They weren't malicious mistakes. Just mistakes of judgment -- lethal ones.

And on a completely different scale, I have also been watching Chernobyl. This was a disaster where mistakes were made mostly by young inexperienced men within a corrupt self serving system, and with shoddy manufacturing – it nearly cost the lives of tens of millions. Speak of the widening gyre. When your tussle is with the power of an atom the stakes are so much higher. The mistakes were not huge in themselves, but together they amounted to something that could have threatened human life in Europe.

This really is the human predicament. Small errors of judgment can have unforeseen consequences. We find it hard to understand the

whole. We focus too much on some things and not others. There is malice and greed. But above all our problem is blindness.

IT is interesting that the gospels are full of stories of blindness and of healing from being blind. We can see now, that blindness is our collective problem. We are all a little like the couple stumbling around in the snow. Or the technicians trying to prevent a meltdown that would enter ground water or explode and kill 60 million instantly.

Wittgenstein said. *The picture kept us captive....our ways of seeing, which are so powerful, create our worlds, and those worlds can be with the flow of nature or against it.*

Recently we have begun to see that our ways of seeing are undermining nature.

But within the Christian story there is always hope....The Christian message both urges us to repent and gives us a vision of the future.

Barbara Rossing, the New Testament professor who was visiting us recently talked about how Jonah is a story of hope because it shows us that a corrupt system can turn around. Can repent.

She reminded us that salvation and healing are really the same word. We have always been talking about salvation in church, we just now need to see that it extends further than we thought, to the natural world as well as us.

She ended with the ubiquitous tree of life. This is the total vision of peacefulness and abundant life. The most powerful symbol of healing in the Bible. This is also what we have to offer the world.

The vision of a world healed. Our message should always be something visionary as well as warning.

We need to hang on to these visions of healing because another aspect of our collective blindness is that we become so focused on solutions that we lose sight of the larger picture. The coroner explicitly said that was the problem with the Czech couple. It was also one of the problems at Chernobyl. It could easily be our problem now, as we navigate the climate issue. WE have to make

sure that our focus does not become so narrow that we make the situation worse.

Because we are blind we need guides and prophets to warn us and to see this vision, every bit as much as people did in the days of Jeremiah.

But probably the best known young prophet is Greta. She is so sure and single minded.

She is unrelenting in her denunciations. Like Jeremiah she has been called as a very young person. She says she is too young to do this work. Jeremiah said something similar. The old ways have not worked, she says. The older generation has failed she says. Political movements have all failed, she says. She doesn't hate her mother and father, but she did resolutely refuse to go back to school. She does hate the dithering and double standards of her parents' generation. She's not giving away her possessions, but she is speaking for the poor and living lightly in the world. So even the stern words from Jesus have some relevance today. Greta shows us

that we need to do something new. And sometimes that does mean hating your mother and father and brother and sister.

As individuals we know so much depends on political powers  
But we can learn to listen better to nature.

To Pray for nature's healing

To pray that we will be healed from blindness

We can Support the prophets amongst us and those who work to change an unjust system

As voters we can make this issue more important than any other.

As Christians, we can try to listen and find meaning and guidance in nature itself.

And we can pray....

I want to end by saying with you the healing prayer from the ecumenical community on the island of Iona

But here we are praying, not only for ourselves, but for every part of nature.

For nature as she groans as in childbirth, for nature as she is screaming, as the ground trembles. For nature where the centre

does not hold. For nature as she labours on, one season following  
the other through all of this. For nature out of which will emerge  
the tree of life.

May the Spirit of the Living God  
Present with us now  
Enter you, in body soul and spirit  
And heal you of all that harms you  
In Jesus name, Amen. –Iona Community