Ecological Spirituality and God's Justice

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Pentecost + 16B – 2nd Sunday in the Season of Creation – Isa 35 4-7a, Ps 146, James 2 1-10 14-17, Mark 7 24-37

Last Sunday, we started looking at Ecological Spirituality. As we did, the word that kept coming back at us was relationship: our relationship with each other, with Earth, our common home, with all life on Earth, and our relationship with the Source of all Being – the God who spoke all of us into being. That's why we named Genesis 1.3 as pivotal – *Then God said* – the creative Word that made everything.

As we thought about all these relationships, it became clear that our spirituality exists in our physical life just as much as it does in our emotional and intellectual life. Spirituality has important practical, physical dimensions. That's why we remembered Paul's words from Romans 1.20 where he says that *God's power and nature have always been understood and seen through creation*. Our physical relationship with creation is critical to our spirituality.

That was underlined as we remembered John 1.14 which says that Jesus – the creating Word of God –came among us as a physical, flesh-and-blood human being. God takes physical existence seriously! We looked at the way Jesus modelled relationship through kindness, compassion and costly generosity – just as we've seen in the exhausted Jesus of today's gospel. And since we are spoken into being by God, the model of relationship of Jesus, the Word made flesh, is our guide to living. But kind, compassionate, generous living is vulnerable living. So what happens when we encounter people suffering the effects of greed, and cruel violence? Jesus' healing and teaching

ministry addressed the consequences of greed, and cruel violence, so responding to those consequences is also *our* model.

So, all the selfish, destructive evils we witness; the shocking disparities in wealth and influence that deprive countless millions of access to the basics of life? What about them, and the chronic, seemingly unstoppable damage being inflicted on the living planet and its worst effects harming the poor and weak? How does ecological spirituality speak to all this? Our scriptures today speak unequivocally of God's *justice*.

In today's scriptures, we encounter words about God's anger and vengeance. We *comfortable* Christians are chronically *un*comfortable with these sorts of words. Lots of people tell me they don't like the God they meet in the Old Testament because of all the angry words. But do we forget that we see Jesus angry with the way power is misused by community leaders? We saw him angered in last week's gospel by the religious-police-tactics of Pharisees and scribes accusing his disciples for eating with unwashed hands. And we liked Jesus protecting us.

We heard God tell Isaiah today to do something similar. *Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, don't fear! Here is your God. He'll come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.* We may get uncomfortable about talk of God's anger and vengeance. That's because we don't hear these words as people who have fearful hearts. But in what politicians call 'our own backyard', there are people who hear these words of God's anger and vengeance as uplifting and hopeful. There are downtrodden people in Australia, around the western Pacific region, and in nearby Asian countries struggling to survive in the face of the juggernaut of exploitation, economic colonisation, and a climate catastrophe that is not of their own making.

These are the people *of a fearful heart* that God wants Isaiah to address. These are people who find hope in words that declare God's vengeance and terrible recompense. Today's Psalm underlines this commitment of God's to the poor and needy. It's a litany of God's love for such people – promising justice for the oppressed, food for the hungry, captives set free, the bowed down lifted up, God's care for the refugee, for the widow and the orphan. And *as for the way of the wicked,* those who are responsible for all this misery, *God will bring it to ruin!*

Earth itself is included in Isaiah's message of hope and healing. *Waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; 7 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water*. Care of God's creation is an integral part of our call to care for God's poor, because they suffer most immediately from ecological harm. We have a chance to roll our sleeves up and do something about that after church today. If you're able, head up to the wetlands and join Heather and the others in the tree-planting that's happening there. Ecological spirituality without practical engagement is hollow – to paraphrase the Letter of James.

Speaking of James, it's not just the Old Testament prophets who declare God's preferential commitment to the poor, the sick and the needy. We heard James say it quite categorically today: 5 *Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?*

What challenges do we feel as we consider today's scriptures? What's our relationship with God's world? Are we worried that *we* find God's anger uncomfortable when poor people can find hope in it? Are we thinking about new initiatives to grow a more mature faith here? What might our collective faith inspire that could respond practically to the chronic

homelessness, epidemic loneliness, failure in closing the gap, and rampant environmental vandalism we see around us; all so patently offensive to the God who loves the people and other creatures who suffer these terrible wrongs? How will our ecological spirituality help bring God’s healing and justice to any of these? Amen