

World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation

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Pentecost + 15 – Song 2 8-13 – Ps 45 1-2, 6-9 – Jas 1 17-27 – Mk 7 1-8 14-23

Three verses underpin our choice to celebrate the Season of Creation. Genesis 1.3 – *Then God said...* John 1.14 – *The Word became flesh...* and Romans 1.20 – *God's power and nature have always been understood and seen through creation.*

The banner outside the church tells everyone that this month St John's is exploring ecological spirituality. But what's that? What do ecology and spirituality have to do with each other? Let's think about each of them in turn – ecology and spirituality – then see if we can put them together.

So ecology? Ecology is *the science which deals with the relationship of living things to their environments. That sounds like zoology; a physical science; not a spiritual one. So am I asking you to imagine David Attenborough squatting beside a hole and a furry little ghost pops out of it? No. So what's ecology got to do with spirituality? It's in that word relationship; the relationship of living things to their environments. Relationships aren't just physical things; they involve much more than our bodies.*

So what *is* spirituality? Spirituality describes our response to the sense that there's something besides our physical selves; something more to experiencing life in this world than we discover purely through our senses of taste, smell, touch, sight and hearing. Spirituality says we sense that the reality we live in has a cosmic or divine Nature. Spirituality describes our quest to relate to that cosmic or divine Nature.

Our quest to relate – there's that relationship word again. So ecology studies living beings' relationship to their home, and spirituality describes our relationship to a greater reality – some call that reality the Source of Being. So, *ecological spirituality*? Do physical life and spiritual life have a relationship with each other – apart from a body providing a spirit with temporary accommodation? That's the popular way to describe it. But aren't spirits pure and bodies gross? Isn't this like trying to mix oil with water? Is the idea of *ecological spirituality* trying to force an artificial link between our physical and spiritual life? Is this just religion trying to force imaginary values on us – so it can tell us what we should do with our own bodies?

I can't pretend some Church leaders don't make loud public comments about what people can and can't do with our bodies. Religious leaders of every persuasion have been doing that forever, it seems. We saw it happen in today's gospel. We saw the Pharisees and scribes, the spiritual leaders of Jesus' people, challenge Jesus because they saw some of his followers hadn't washed their hands in the prescribed way before eating. Those spiritual leaders saw a definite link between what we do with our bodies and our spiritual integrity. But I'll get back to them in a minute.

The Law they were proclaiming talks in one place about people's wrong behaviour violating the land, and the land reacting by vomiting them out. ^{Lev 18.26-30} That might sound a little bit extreme, but what's understood here is a complex relationship – and there's that relationship word again – a complex relationship between what we do with our bodies and our spiritual health, and what we do with our bodies and the effect that has on the health of the land we live on. *A relationship between our actions, our spiritual health and the health of the land where we live* – that sounds like it has a lot to do with ecology, doesn't it; *ecological spirituality*?

So let's get back to today's Gospel and those Jewish religious leaders challenging Jesus because some of his followers didn't wash their hands before eating. It reminds us of that extraordinary time just a few years ago when we had to treat each other and ourselves as if we might infect each other with a deadly disease. Back then, *doing the right thing* meant avoiding each other's possible dangerous uncleanness. And violating the land? I'm reminded of last week's *God Forbid* programme on ABC RN where Professor Auntie Anne Pattel-Gray spoke about the relationship between Aboriginal people's language and their ancestral land. They couldn't take land from a neighbouring nation because they didn't have the words or songs to understand it and care for it. She described environment and people's actions, understanding, values and spirituality as intertwined in a living relationship which shapes nature and identity.

The ancient scriptures seemed to get this, but the Pharisees and scribes were so fastidious about what people did with their bodies that they missed the point that relationship lies at the centre of the law's teaching. That's what Jesus tried to get through to them. Our spiritual life is healthy if we act *not* out of fear and knee-jerk judgement, but out of love and commitment to good relationship and belonging.

So what do we do with all this – this interwoven relationship of ourselves, our neighbours, our common home, and the Source of our Being? We don't need to be reminded of what's going wrong; that's plain enough to see. Ecological spirituality challenges much that is damaging that interwoven relationship right now, and it demands that we do something about it right where we are. Heather's going to give us a few pointers in the notices today about how we can start right here and now.

Today we're called to turn from fear and isolation, and turn to hope and belonging. We choose to follow Jesus who we saw today brush aside the fixation of the religious leaders on purity, and instead calls us to nurture our neighbours and our

common home, drawing strength from the Source of our Being.
That's living ecological spirituality. Amen