



Sunday 6th April 2025
Lent Sermon Series 5
The Rev'd Canon Jenny Wilson

In the name of God, creating, redeeming, sanctifying, ... Amen.

I wonder if there is hope for the healing of creation when we allow the earth to speak, to have a voice, when we listen to earth's voice, when we allow it to affect us.

As we gather this Choral Evensong in the final of our Lent sermon series exploring the theme of Christian Hope through the Five Marks of Mission, this evening we will explore the hope we might find as we 'strive to preserve the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth'.

Is it possible to hear the voice of the earth and to find hope there? Is it possible to find hope when human beings speak on behalf of the earth? Is it possible that our voices are what matter?

Walter Bruggemann, the Old Testament scholar and great inspiration for preachers, wrote words about the power of utterance, the power of a voice really, when he said this:

"The prophet Isaiah, speaking in the context of the exile of the people of Israel in Babylon, responds: 'Here is your God!' (Isaiah 40:9) [Brueggemann reflects ...] The very utterance opened a new possibility that the poet will present ... Brueggemann, who describes his preacher as a poet, gives to that poet extraordinary creative power: The poet in vivid imagination can create ...

This is indeed a word from the outside ... a word that comes in the way of poetry, that offers no explanation, no certainty, no accommodation to the agents of surveillance. It is a moment of utterance! ... everything has now been changed by the poetic utterance, because the poetry cannot be unsaid ... The word has been uttered and the juices of alternative possibility have begun to flow."

When someone utters a word of hope, in the voice of the prophet proclaiming the presence of God, speaking comfort in the voice of God, that utterance has power. The power to give hope. And that utterance cannot be washed away, cannot be unsaid. That utterance exists and so "everything has now been changed." Brueggemann is clear that this utterance gives no certainty, but the hearer surely suspects that nothing that matters gives certainty. The utterance has given hope. Perhaps the voice of the earth or the voice of humanity speaking on behalf of the earth can give hope, too.

When I was studying theology, I was fortunate to be taught by biblical scholars who were working on a project called The Earth Bible Project. One of the key themes in the Earth Bible Project was that the earth is a character in the biblical text. The earth has a voice. The earth makes utterances, to use Brueggemann's words, through actions and through the voices of others.

Not only do the biblical and other writers speak on behalf of the earth but Earth speaks on Earth's own behalf giving insight that only one that is not a human being can give.

The Catholic biblical scholar Michael Trainor, a theologian who is also teaching at St Barnabas College, has written a commentary on the Gospel of Luke, entitled *About Earth's Child: An Ecological Listening to the Gospel of Luke*. Michael Trainor's commentary is an example of the writing of The Earth Bible Project. In his book, Michael Trainor draws our attention to the earth speaking. He writes:

"The other silent or unnoticed voice in Luke's story [is]heard. This is the voice of Earth that speaks alongside and sometimes with the voice of God, Jesus and the gospel's human characters. I am reminded of the insight which St Bede (672-735 CE) had about Luke 8:24 when Jesus rebukes the wind and raging waves that threaten to annihilate a boat full of his disciples. The response of the wind and the waves to Jesus comes about for 'every creature senses the Creator because they are responsive to the majesty of the creature. And what they sense is insensible to us.' For Bede, a 7th Century biblical interpreter, Earth was living and, in some ways, more attuned to God than human beings who seemed 'insensible'. It follows from Bede's logic, that we can learn from Earth as we listen to its voice and deepen our 'sensitivity'.¹

Later in Michael Trainor's commentary where he explores the passage from Luke's Passion narrative that we heard read this evening, he draws attention to the Earth accompanying Jesus and the voice of Earth again. Trainor believes that in Luke's Gospel Jesus dies still in the garment placed upon him by Herod and his guards. He writes:

'Jesus 'dies shrouded as Earth's child. ...Jesus is accompanied by Earth through the passion, from his kneeling on the Mount, being accompanied to his place of death by Earth's wood and becoming transfixed to it; now, clothed in Earth's linen. All these images reinforce a profound eco-christological truth ... Jesus is from Earth, with it, heals it, feeds it, accompanies it and dies with it attached to him.'²

We may find this a little strange at first. To notice the presence of the earth in the ground that Jesus kneels on in the Garden of Gethsemane, in Jesus' garment, in the wood of the cross, to notice these things as a presence, Earth's presence, may seem strange ... but if we allow this lens on the story of the Passion we find an even more powerful role for Earth's wisdom, earth's voice.

Jesus dies with two criminals on either side. It is in Luke's passion that we hear Jesus words of forgiveness for those who nailed him to the cross. 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' It is in Luke's Passion that we witness the criminals' conversation with Jesus, a conversation that ends with the words of one criminal: 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' And we hear Jesus' reply: 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

And then the scene of his death:

It is now about noon, and darkness comes over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light fails; and the curtain of the temple is torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, says, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathes his last.

It is in this scene that Earth speaks. That Earth knows the truth of what is happening, more truly than any human being who is witnessing these events. Michael Trainor writes: 'Earth,

¹ Michael Trainor *About Earth's Child: An Ecological Listening to the Gospel of Luke* pp5-6.

² Ibid., p281.

Jesus' companion goes into mourning. The [connection] between Earth's child and its household is palpable. Darkness pervades the universe including the cosmos and the heavenly sphere ... The ecological darkness, Earth's mourning prepares for the divine light that will exude on to it in Jesus' resurrection.'³

Michael Trainor draws our attention to a new way of hearing the words of scripture – to notice the character of the earth, to hear the voice of the earth as we hear the truths of the scriptures. This is one way that will help our conversion to a deep respect for, love and imperative to care for creation.

It is also true that human beings must speak on behalf of the earth, on behalf of creation.

Pope Francis reflects in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* on the purpose in God's eyes of each creature: *Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material world speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.*⁴

Pope Francis concludes his reflection on a scriptural basis for “our care of our common home”, as *Laudato Si'* is subtitled, by writing of Jesus: *With moving tenderness he would remind them that each one of them is important in God's eyes: Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. ... The Lord was able to invite others to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the world because he himself was in constant touch with nature, lending it attention full of fondness and wonder.*⁵

May Jesus' words inspire us to be attentive to the beauty in the world, to the longing for healing in the world in our time and place. As we draw to a close our reflection on hope for the healing of creation coming from listening to the voice of God, the voice of the earth and human voices speaking on creation's behalf, we will hear the voice of a poet Denise Levertov. This is her poem entitled “Beginners”:

But we have only begun

to love the earth.

We have only begun

to imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope?

—so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?

—we have only begun

to imagine justice and mercy,

only begun to envision

³ Ibid., p282.

⁴ Pope Francis *Laudato Si'* 84

⁵ Ibid., 96,97

*how it might be
to live as siblings with beast and flower,
not as oppressors.
Surely our river
cannot already be hastening
into the sea of nonbeing?
Surely it cannot
drag, in the silt,
all that is innocent?
Not yet, not yet—
there is too much broken
that must be mended,
too much hurt we have done to each other
that cannot yet be forgiven.
We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.
So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,
so much is in bud.*