

*St Francis, friar & preacher, patron of ecology*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

St Francis, Year A, 1 October 2023 Reverend Martin Johnson

*Genesis 1.24-31a; Psalm 67; Corinthians 9.6-12; Luke 12.15-21*

Many, many moons ago I went to a midnight screening of the movie *Koyaanisqatsi* at the Valhalla Cinema in Northcote, a flea pit if ever there was one. The title of the movie is from the Hopi Indian word meaning 'life out of balance,' it is a documentary which demonstrates, in sound and vision – no text, how humanity has grown apart from nature.

It has been argued that the root cause of this separation is the interpretation of the passage we heard this morning from Genesis: *And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'* As recently as 2016 the Polish Minister for the Environment cited this text as justification for the logging of primeval forests in his country. According to one scholar writing on this passage, this attitude of human superiority and unbridled domination is at the root of our current ecological crisis.

A few years after my Valhalla experience, the then Bishop of Canberra and Goulburn George Browning addressed the synod of the Diocese of Wangaratta, our response to this ecological crisis is core business, he told us. I was learning to think theologically at this time, and this certainly got me thinking; up until that point pondering on the theology of blessing two slugs in a jar at a St Francis Day Eucharist was as far as I had got.

It was to the Middle Ages that I turned and discovered a flowering of thought on the topic of the environment: Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love, Hildegard of Bingen's Lament and Francis of Assisi and his Canticle of the Sun, among others. I was struck by the freshness of their writings; they could have been written today.

The story goes that St Francis received a message from God: 'arise Francis and repair my house.' He immediately understood this to mean that God wanted him to patch up the old termite infested chapel down the road, as you would. But indeed, God had a broader vision as God usually does...my house, the Church itself was clearly in need of Reform, but Francis took this a step further, my house 'the place where my honour dwells' goes the Psalm; is this not the entire created order. Clearly Francis and the Franciscan Spirituality named after him in his found God at work in every aspect of creation, this is indeed...God's house. Following in Franciscan tradition one of the Assisi declarations in the 1980's stated: our dominion cannot be understood as licence to abuse, spoil, squander or destroy what God has made to manifest his glory (God's house). That dominion cannot be anything other than a stewardship in symbiosis with all creatures.

At the heart of the issue is the question of greed, the drive to consume and to amass wealth. We know how this damages the environment and divides us and yet we seem almost powerless to change. Thomas Traherne the seventeenth century Anglican divine wrote 'delighting in God, and delighting in God's creation brings us fully alive.' He wrote a wonderful purple passage which began: 'you will never enjoy the world aright till the sea itself floweth in your veins...' and he concluded 'till you love all people so as to desire their happiness with a thirst equal to the zeal of your own, till you delight in God for being good to all: you will never enjoy the world.'

Our readings this morning from Paul and our gospel speak directly of the greed that mars our world and the generosity we are called to embody. We will struggle whether in the Church or the wider world to care for the creation until we care for one another. Paul writing to the Corinthian Church is always trying to bring them together to unify them in every way. This passage along with the gospel teach us that care for one other, for the created order and our love of God are not in any way exclusive, they cannot be separated.

Two things I would want to say about this. The first concerns the idea at the heart of our spirituality, of our Christian imagination - that of the incarnation, the idea that God has come among us. This drives our thinking, the way we engage with, among other things, science and economics. Physicists are still trying to understand *how* it is that our universe is filled with matter, theologians help us understand *why* it is...because matter, matters. It matters to God, it has a sacred quality imbued by God's presence, it is sacramental, it should matter to us. Matter has a sacramental quality when it points away from itself to something more. We as individuals or as a Church are sacramental when we point way from ourselves to others, to the created order to God, this is revealed in our ethical life. The created order itself has a sacramental quality because it reveals to us something of the divine beauty and order.

The second leads on from this, it is the question of economics. When I was at school, our cookery lessons were called 'home economics.' This gives us a clue about what Paul and others mean when they use the word *oikonomia* - from where get economy. He is speaking of the household, but also the household of God and more... arise Francis and repair my house. It is somewhat naïve to compare the economics of the ancients with our modern world, yes, it is. But it is fascinating that for the ancient Greeks a decision was considered economically rational only when taken towards a praiseworthy end, that end was the participation of all. An interesting thought when we consider today's economic rationalism. We would do well to consider this ancient idea of *oikonomia*.

As we prepare ourselves to come forward to make our communion with God and with each other in the Eucharist, we are confronted with the reality that simple matter, matters. In the Eucharist simple things are imbued with a sacramental quality and we are all able to participate. When this is at the heart of our thinking our care of the environment naturally flows. At present our thinking is not rational...even weapons factories are aiming to be carbon neutral, surely this is *Koyaanisqatsi*. Amen.