

Theological Imaginings: Presence to Earth



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Welcome to this theological reflection on the theme *Presence to Earth*.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands on which each one of us meets, in my case the Tuurbal people north of the Brisbane River in Qld, Australia.

*This ancient land was here
In the silences and its sounds of life
Long before history was written
Held carefully in its dreaming.
We acknowledge the traditional owners
and custodians of the land and water
of our various areas.
We pay our respects to them
and honour their links with all creation.
May we walk gently on this land.*

I would also like us to become present to Earth. With St Francis we can embrace Mother Earth, Brother Sun/Fire, Sister Water and Brother Wind/Air as our kin¹, biologically related through our common origins from stardust and suffused with the same Spirit. We, too, are made from the elements of earth, fire, wind, water and spirit.

You may have a stronger sense of identification with one of these elements over another. For us in the southern hemisphere it is currently Spring which is associated with air or breath or wind. For those in the northern hemisphere Autumn is associated with Earth and harvests and fruitfulness. Some places have four seasons which are markedly different from each other. Others around the Equator experience fairly constant temperatures with fluctuations between the dry and the wet. When I am present to Earth, I am tuned in to it with all my senses. I feel it, smell it, and can often touch and taste its distinctiveness.

When we are present to someone or something, it is a two-way encounter. It or they are also present to us. The relationship is “mutually beneficial” to use a phrase of Thomas Berry:

The Great Work now, as we move into a new millennium, is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be

¹ See the *Canticle of Creation* of St Francis for his use of these titles:
<https://www.catholic.org/prayers/prayer.php?p=3188>

present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.²

The Earth community is a source of awe, wonder, insight, beauty, anguish, pain and sometime suffering. We can enter into its “groaning” something that was understood by St Paul when he wrote to the Christians in Rome.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ((Romans, 8, 22)

We, too, are part of that groaning as the Covid pandemic impacts our lives and our loving and our grieving for deceased friends, relatives and colleagues. We are all affected economically, socially and culturally, some more so than others. We are present to the Earth community and they are present to us in these challenging times. We strain towards what we hope will be a just regeneration where Earth itself is not abandoned in this time of crisis and opportunity.

Earth is Sacred

“Everything is interconnected”³, a phrase used repeatedly by Pope Francis. Our presence to Earth and Earth’s presence to us are manifestations of Sacred Presence. In *Laudato Si*⁴, the Pope says:

We can say that “alongside revelation properly so-called, contained in sacred Scripture, there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of night”.⁵ Paying attention to this manifestation, we learn to see ourselves in relation to all other creatures: “I express myself in expressing the world; in my effort to decipher the sacredness of the world, I explore my own”.⁶

All is part of the community of creation, a new paradigm developed by Elizabeth Johnson which takes us beyond a paradigm of dominion. She explains that the theological construct of the community of creation is founded on the belief that “all beings are in fact creatures, sustained in life by the Creator of all that is.”⁷ This is the case for humankind and other species, and this commonality before God is stronger than our differences. In our kinship all are “grounded in absolute, universal reliance on the living God for the breath of life.”⁸ This pattern of relationship, which locates us humans alongside other creatures and stresses interconnectedness without blurring differences, gives a new impetus for ethical behaviour

² Thomas Berry, “The Great Work” in *The Great Work*, 3

³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si, On Care for our Common Home* (hereafter *LS*), 20-60,

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, 16

⁴ LS 85

⁵ ID., *Catechesis* (2 August 2000), 3: *Insegnamenti* 23/2 (2000), 112.

⁶ PAUL RICOEUR, *Philosophie de la Volonté, t. II: Finitude et Culpabilité*, Paris, 2009, 216

⁷ Elizabeth A Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 268

⁸ Ibid

based in that new relationality with one another and the wider whole which can supercede notions of dominion.

In other words, we are present in community, alongside other creatures, with whom we have more in common than what differentiates us, and from that stance we are present in community with the living and loving God, and impelled to act ethically for the whole community.

Johnson takes Job as an exemplar when she is exploring the theological significance of our membership in the community of creation. With Job, Johnson asks the beasts about the interconnection of all that is with God. Job is searching to understand why he is suffering:

Job has come upon hard times, and his friends argue that he must have sinned. Job maintains his innocence, but his suffering is very real. Eventually God speaks to him out of the whirlwind, and asks “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the Earth?”(Job 38, 4) The questions go on and on as God draws attention to the scope of the physical world and the qualities of the wild yet free animals and the fearsome beasts. These creations are a far cry from anything which has been subject to human dominion, yet they are revelatory.⁹

Job realised that the hand of God was present in the multiple manifestations around him rather than in the voices of his friends who denounced him as a sinner because of his suffering. Everyone and everything are in communion just by being who and what they are in themselves.

There is mutuality in the relations between God and the Earth community. If we are truly present we can say in the words of Gerard Manly Hopkins, “The world is charged with the glory of God”.¹⁰ He does point out in another poem, *Hurrahing in Harvest* that there can be a gap between that reality and our presence to it:

It is timely to open our senses and our hearts and be present to Earth in her grandeur and her groaning.

⁹ Johnson, *Beasts*, 268

¹⁰ Gerard Manly Hopkins, *God's Grandeur*, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/gods-grandeur>