

Silencing the Cry of Blood

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Earth's beauty shines for all with eyes to see. But the earth also speaks, for all with ears to hear. Today brings a chance to listen – as God listens – to the land.

The Season of Creation teaches us about the Earth Story in the Bible. Alongside the story of God and of God's people, the forgotten saga of creation is emerging at last. A time of planetary crisis is a time to hear that song and join the singing.

Today's readings remind us that the three stories of Scripture do not just sit alongside each other: they are closely intertwined, plaited into a single strand. *What people do to one another affects the earth and affects God.*

While there are many lessons in the tragic tale of the murder of Abel, the earth story usually goes unnoticed. We are not alone in ignoring the truths of this tale – Israel, too, had to hear the lessons over and over through history.

The key verse in this text is haunting: 'the voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground'.

If we were telling the human story, we would focus on the tragedy of human existence: one brother killing another in blind envy and the need to be accepted. We would see how often this theme of sibling hatred gets told in the Hebrew Scriptures, and how the sad consequences affect human society to this day.

If we were telling the God story, we would notice how justice and mercy dance together: Cain wears the consequences of his action, but God refuses to let vengeance dictate. There is no 'life for life', no killing for killing. Instead, the practical and merciful justice of God shines out: the one who threatens society is banished from society – but God forbids the luxury of revenge.

We would be confronted by a God who hears the cry for justice. There is no hiding, no impunity. Just as God later heard the cry of slaves in Egypt, and the cry of the poor in Israel, so the voice of the victim cannot be silenced. God hears, and God acts.

But what is the earth story in this text?

One good way into any text is to ask this question: *why was this story told?* What point did the authors want to make?

This is a story from exile. The final text of Genesis was shaped by the catastrophe of a people expelled from ancestral land. In a bitter reckoning, those who felt immune from all enemies, who were not victims but exploiters of victims, suddenly discovered they too could be banished, made refugees.

The land was theirs no longer, and they needed to understand. Why did God say 'no' to them? Why did the land let them go?

Leviticus and Deuteronomy hint that the land had enough. It would tolerate no longer what they were doing to it and to each other. God warned that those who neglected the Jubilee – that time to respect the holiness of land by seeding no crops – would be removed for seventy years 'while the land has its Sabbath rest'.

The land cries out from abuse and neglect, and God hears that cry too. The shalom – the peaceful, bountiful well-being – of the soil and the waters *can even outweigh the needs of people* who refuse to tend it properly.

Expelled from the land around Eden, Cain – the tiller of crops – can plant his seeds no longer. The land he exploited is to have its Sabbath rest. The cry of the land was heard by God.

But there was another cry: the tragic lamenting call of blood, murdered blood, innocent blood, blood spilled in sad betrayal. The very ground that brought Cain his success became a dumping place for his ghastly crime.

The people of exile understood. God warned them through Torah; God warned them through prophets. God's warnings were ignored in arrogant contempt. In the Land of Promise, given as a haven for those who had no home, blood called from the soil, murdered blood, innocent blood, blood spilled in sad betrayal. The very ground that brought Israel's success became a dumping place for victims of swift injustice and slow neglect.

The exiles told the story because they recognised their guilt. The rot in their society made them Cain – and they had not even recognised their victims as their kin. No need to be your brothers' keeper if you refuse to see them as your brothers.

Yet the land bore witness; and God was listening.

Most Australians have not yet tasted exile; but we live in stolen lands. There has been no treaty, no payment, no deed of legal sale: those who first belonged to this good land are now the exiles, wandering in a foreign culture that displaced them without pity. Aboriginal people would understand the story of Cain's murder. They would hear blood crying from the ground.

How can our urban European stock grasp what this means? This is not metaphor or abstract symbol. I mean it literally – Indigenous people listen to the land. It speaks to them, comforts them, warns them, guides and teaches them.

This is not only true in Australia. Indigenous peoples across the planet tell the same story. Mines dug into sacred land bring cries like the wounding of a mother. Using up resources, polluting what remains, makes the land sick; and its sickness is contagious for those close to the land. The language of the Bible matches the experience of all Indigenous people: they listen to the land.

That means to hear the cry of the earth is part of being human. We all come from Indigenous stock; the only difference is the number of generations since our own ancestors wandered lightly on the soil, tending its needs, listening to its moods. Countless millennia of human evolution have, in the latest language of science, 'hard-wired' that capacity into our brains.

So we can recover what we have lost. We can learn once more to hear the land. We can return to a life in balance and let the seasons teach us what is real. Like wild animals before earthquakes, like our own house pets, like Aboriginal elders and the God of creation, we too can listen to the land.

What we will hear first, if we listen, is the cry of blood.

The story of the first murder begins when God rejects the offering of Cain, and then warns the 'tiller of soil' that his anger is a dangerous sign. Since the text never explains what Cain does wrong, that is not the key point being made. Instead, the story teaches that *provocation is no excuse for violence*.

That rule applies in primary schools. Many children who hit or kick are responding to being provoked (and many of them are witnesses to chronic violence in the home, usually against their mothers but sometimes against themselves). But no matter how severe the provocation (and some children are highly skilled at provoking!) the excuse does not wash. Violence is wrong and will always bring consequences.

Cain masters his anger, or at least its outward show: his rage turns coldly into premeditated violence. Abel is not the one who causes the offence: it is *God's* rejection that cuts Cain so deep. But God is not in reach, so the brother becomes the victim.

The parallels with Australian history are chilling.¹

Europeans came as tillers of the soil, fencing out the wandering peoples who understood the land far more deeply than its invaders. Europeans came with God on

their side, taking for granted that their ways were God's ways and their offerings would be acceptable.

In most encounters, Indigenous people posed no threat; either they welcomed the Europeans or withdrew to wait for the strangers to go away. But the invasion did not stop; and when the land began to cry out, its protests went unheard. Forests were felled, rivers dammed and polluted, game animals hunted down and replaced with grazing stock. Grasslands were fenced and ploughed under and sown with alien crops that depleted the soil.

Faced with the loss of all their food sources at once, Aboriginal people began to help themselves to the animals the Europeans raised. This was only natural for a people whose culture was centred on sharing.

It was not natural for Europeans. They had no ears to hear the protest of the land. The stealing of land – not paid for, not asked for – was never labelled 'theft'; there were no written deeds of title to dispute. When Indigenous hunters took a sheep, *that* was theft.

The Europeans were provoked. Since God could not have turned away from them (God was on *their* side), their anger, provoked by every missing sheep, targeted the 'natives'. In many places the rage turned coldly into premeditated violence.

Like Cain, those who massacred Indigenous people hid out of sight of settlements; killing women and children was kept a dark secret. Blood was spilled into the ancient land – and now the cry of the land had a new intensity, a tragic wounded voice of innocence lost.

White people did not hear. They were provoked! When Aboriginal people fought back, increasing the provocation, whites responded with deadlier violence. Early on the use of smallpox was promoted as an effective weapon of mass destruction. It was used, and it worked.

Slowly 'terra nullius' came closer to reality: a land emptied of its people, a people thrown off their own land.

None of us today were responsible for this tragic history. We did no killing. We saw no slaughters. And we have had many generations since there was any will to hear the land cry out.

But the cry of blood remains; the soil still wears its stain. And I believe that Scripture is clear – only one process can heal what greed has torn.

There is a clear theological order – and it is not what politics would suggest. Even those who borrow the religious word ‘Reconciliation’ seldom see it as the *final* step, not the first one, in the process of dealing with the cry of blood.

The first step is *Repentance*². This was Jesus’ radical call: turn your minds around, retrace your steps, be honest about your past, for the fullness of God’s presence is coming near. In South Africa they knew the order: ‘Truth’ before ‘Reconciliation’. Until the cries of victims are finally heard in full – and we who hear say, ‘We are sorry’ – no reconciliation can be possible.

The second step is *Reparation*: generous restitution of wrong.

This is a hard step, friends. It is the missing link in many of our actions. Yet the truth of it is deeply scriptural: violation puts things out of joint. Brokenness leaves a tragic legacy. And those who benefit from violation are the ones to put it right.

What reparations might mean in Australia is something we cannot answer for ourselves; the Indigenous people must have a say in what feels to them like the beginning of justice. What we do have is the Zaccheus model in the gospels – a man whose repentance was confirmed in reparations, and only then could Jesus proclaim that ‘salvation has come to this house’.

And there is yet another step in the healing process: there must be *Forgiveness*.

This step will never be under our control. We cannot ensure that it will come at all; we offer repentance and reparations since that is what justice demands; but we can never assume that forgiveness will follow.

One sign of hope is that the land shares a remarkable quality with those Indigenous people who seek its good: land is forgiving. New life springs forth where wounds have scarred.

We have witnessed this in the aftermath of volcano and tsunami: terrible devastation gives way, and usually more quickly than observers can believe, to fertility and bursting growth. And remarkably, the testimony of many astonished pilgrims is the same: the wasteland of broken relations with peoples we have wronged needs only our willingness to come forward in simplicity – and forgiveness follows in a dance of new beginnings.

Because the land and its people so often meet our repentance with forgiveness, then *Reconciliation* can become a possibility; but it is always and always a gift of sheer grace.

I think the crisis of our times demands a bold response. I believe that these are days that long for our repentance, our reparations, our willingness to learn from those we have wronged.

After all, part of listening to the land is listening to those who best know its stories. Indigenous people can help us hear the true earth story – the cries of blood, but also the songs of hopefulness and praise. If the land itself is ever to recover, healing us, its stewards, its temporary guests, we will need the wisdom of the ages: that same ancient wisdom we have so long denied.

But we are human, and this response is hard. We shrink from the task that is required of us.

So here is the gospel by which we are saved: *we do not take up the task in our own strength alone.*

Listen to the words of Jesus from Matthew – words of warning, but also of great hope: ‘Something greater than Jonah and Solomon is here!’ (Matthew 12: 41-42).

What could be greater than Solomon or Jonah? What is the truth that can set us free for the magic of repentance?

The Word of creation descends into the womb of creation. The cry of the land is met by the One who hears all cries; and nothing will ever be the same.

Jesus has gone into the heart of the earth. And Jesus in the heart of the earth is the defining mark of God’s care for creation. Always and everywhere, divine transcendence empties itself into the powerlessness of utter grace.

Then everything is possible: that grace makes it true.

Repentance is possible, and the complicit are transformed.

Reparation is possible, and equality and justice can emerge newborn from the womb, blinking in the sudden sunshine.

Forgiveness is possible, and victims become victorious, set free from all the pain that bound them to their victimisation.

Reconciliation *is* possible – because Jesus in the heart of the earth has heard and answered the cry of blood. And we too can learn to hear it at last, returning to ourselves, daring to listen, daring to respond.

When our response is joined to Jesus in the heart of the earth, grace works its alchemy in the very soil. The cry of blood is silenced; what sounds forth in its place can be an everlasting song of praise and peace.

Will we follow Jesus into the heart of the earth?

The land has wept too long.

It is time to sing another song.

AMEN.

¹ The basic outline of European encounter in Australia is not in historical dispute. However, recent so-called 'history wars' have questioned details of massacres and Aboriginal displacement. For almost all historians, the evidence for deliberate genocidal tactics – including the intentional introduction of smallpox – remains overwhelming. The best summary of this sequence (and itself the centre of some dispute) is *The Other Side of the Frontier* by Henry Reynolds (Penguin Books, 1981).

An exceptionally comprehensive account of Christian encounter 'across the frontier' is John Harris' *One Blood* (Albatross, 1994). Harris details instances when missionaries and other church leaders stood opposed to genocidal practices, often at personal cost.

Parallels with other European invasions are also indisputable. The genocidal destruction of cities of the Five Nations in North America during the 'French and Indian War' (1757 – 1763), burning alive children, women, and livestock, was ordered and coordinated by a young (then British) general named George Washington.

² The Hebrew word for 'repentance', *shubh*, literally means to turn around, turn back, return; the Greek word, *metanoia*, means a change of direction for the *mind* (which for Greeks meant brain and heart, thinking and action). Jesus is proclaiming (Mark 1:15) that the way *forward* to God's fullness is a journey *back* to forgotten wisdom.