

*Chapter Four*

*Readings and Prayers*

*Based on*

*A Theology of Empathy for Earth*

**Readings:**

In our readings we listen to God's word; we also listen for the voice of Earth in Old Testament and Epistle texts.

We may also listen to readings from those who are sensitive to the suffering of Earth and speak for Earth. At the same time, we are conscious of the Cosmic Christ who reconciles all creation to God.

We empathise with Earth and all creatures of Earth groaning and suffering in the current crisis, knowing that the Spirit is also groaning in empathy.

**Prayers:**

Our prayers reflect our desire to join with a groaning creation and the groaning Spirit to call on God to liberate and renew creation.

## *Chapter Four*

# **Readings and Prayers: A Theology of Empathy for Earth**

### **The Voice of Earth**

In The Season of Creation it would seem fitting that the voices of creation, or more specifically the voice of Earth, would be heard as part of the celebration. In our earlier reflection on our kin in creation, we recognised that in various ways creation raises its voices in praise at the impulse of the very word from God that created them

Voices of praise, however, are not the only voices of creation that are recorded. Prophets, whose spirits seem to have been especially sensitive to the voices of the natural world, announce that Earth mourns and fields lament. In other texts, various domains of Earth, or the whole Earth, suffer grievous harm but no cry is heard—the voice of Earth in pain has been suppressed.

As worshippers concerned for our kin, we have an opportunity in the Season of Creation to hear these voices and empathise. For some of us, however, there remains a latent scepticism about Earth having a voice—Earth singing, Earth mourning, Earth crying out to God may be problematic. Of course, we need not assume that the voice of Earth is a human voice. As a living subject, as distinct from a lifeless object, Earth has the capacity to communicate in some way.

The voice of a subject, whether God, a biotic creature or Earth itself, may be classed as a metaphor expressing the reality of communication, something to which scientists testify at a biological level. The term ‘voice’ is our way of recognising Earth as a subject communicating as an equal but different ‘thou’. It is no less problematic to speak of the voice of Earth than to speak of the voice of God.

*Predication of the verb ‘to speak’ of Earth presents no less a challenge than the corresponding religious claim that God ‘speaks.’ The metaphor of voice, however, helps us—as humans—to grasp and appreciate the reality of communication with a ‘thou’ other than ourselves.*

In the Psalms, Earth or members of the Earth community all have ‘voice’. They communicate in their own way when they praise God or celebrate with singing, shouting

and other forms of rejoicing (Ps. 65.8, 12, 13). Earth rejoices (96.11; 97.1), skies are glad (96.11), seas roar in praise (96.11), trees sing (96.12) and the works of creation give thanks (145.10). In Psalm 148 everything from sun and moon to sea monsters and snow are called on to praise God. In these Psalms, Earth and members the Earth community are addressed as subjects capable of responding with praise in a variety of forms of expression.

In the Prophets, especially in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Joel, Earth is addressed as a subject who can hear God or the prophet's word (Isa. 1.2; 34.1; 49.13; Jer. 6.19; 22.29; Joel 2.21-22). Earth is portrayed as having emotions; Earth and the Earth community suffer and mourn (Isa. 24.4; 33.9; Jer. 4.28; 12.4, 11; 14.4; 23.10; Joel 1.18-20;). Earth can obey God's commands (Isa. 43.6; 45.8; 48.13). Earth may tremble or quake in response to human or divine deeds (Jer. 8.16; 10.10; 49.21). In short, Earth is a subject with a voice.

### **Earth Mourning**

Throughout the prophets, God threatens Israel and other nations with the devastation of their lands. The natural domains are to be laid waste for the wrongs of their inhabitants. Earth suffers for the sins of the people. Jeremiah's vision of this devastation of Earth reaches cosmic proportions. He writes:

I looked on Earth, and lo, it was lifeless and empty!  
I looked to the skies and they had no light! (4.23)

In Jeremiah's vision, Earth returns to the lifeless and empty state (*tohu wabohu*) that existed before creation (in Genesis 1.2). The birds flee, the mountains shake and the farmlands become deserts. Earth suffers because of the fierce anger of God against the people.

Jeremiah, however, also has his ear to the ground. He has a deep empathy for his land. He not only sees a vision of impending disaster, he also hears Earth crying out in pain (4.28). The empathy of Earth is also revealed here; she is not a passive, silent mound of matter. Jeremiah, in turn, is asked to weep and wail for the mountains, the fields and the animals (6.10).

The spiritual impulse for empathy is especially evident in the Earth reading of Jeremiah 12. After screaming about personal injustice and the prosperity of the wicked, Jeremiah is moved by the empathy of Earth. The physical expressions of 'mourning' seem to be drought and desolation (Hayes, 2002, 94); the spiritual dimension is anguish and pain in the face of Israel's sin.

How long with Earth mourn  
And the grass of every field wither?  
For the wickedness of those who live in it  
The animals and the birds are swept away,  
And because the people said,  
'He is blind to our ways'. (12.4)

Jeremiah discerned an impulse to empathy within the domains of Earth, a spiritual impulse reaching out to God (12.11). The anguish of creation is more than a poetic metaphor. It reflects an inner impulse to suffer with the creatures of Earth, including human beings. Earth mourns because human beings have become spiritually lost.

## Suffering in Silence

In the prophetic texts, the suffering of Earth and living creatures is expressed in terms of 'mourning' or 'groaning'. Many times in the biblical tradition, however, Earth suffers in silence. The earliest point in the biblical story when we meet the suffering of Earth is immediately after the primal sin of Adam and Eve. The text is familiar:

And to the man God said,  
"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,  
and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you,  
'You shall not eat,'  
cursed is the ground because of you;  
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;  
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;  
and you shall eat the plants of the field.  
By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread  
until you return to the ground  
from out of which you were taken;  
you are dust and to dust you shall return. (Gen. 3.17-19)

The story of the Fall of the first humans is also a story of Earth. The trees of Earth have the potential for life or death. The spiritual dimension of these trees is made explicit. The choice of the first humans to eat from the tree of knowledge leads to their removal from the garden under threat of death.

God's threat of death, however, is not enforced. Instead, God acts in a way that seems rather unfair. After reading the creation story of Genesis 2 from an Earth perspective (as in Chapter 2 above), we come to appreciate the significance of the ground of from which humans were formed. We also celebrate the kinship of our first family in the garden. And we recognise the ground (*adamah*) as the unique source of all life—humans, animals, plants and trees.

Then what happens? God pronounces a couple of curses. The snake is cursed and forced to eat dust. But why should the snake be damned? It was the man and woman who sinned, not the snake. The woman will have pain in childbirth and in her relations with her husband, even though the sin was against God.

*A real problem lies with the final curse. The ground (*adamah*) is cursed because of what the first man has done. It is not the first human, but Earth, the first parent, that is cursed. Where is the justice in that? What has the ground done to*

*deserve such a cruel word from God? Nothing! In short, Earth is an innocent victim.*

The effect of this curse is that the natural processes of production will be disrupted. Thorns and thistles will make cultivating food difficult. Nurturing Earth will become a chore, a painful exercise instead of a joyous ministry. Reading with even a modicum of empathy for Earth, we feel a sense of injustice.

How are we to interpret this Earth reading? We can take a simplistic historical perspective and argue that this text is written to explain the hard life of farmers in ancient Palestine. Even so, the text leaves us with a God who punishes Earth for what humans have done. What is going on here?

When we recognise Earth as the mother who has birthed humans and all other living creatures, we can appreciate that Earth is suffering vicariously—like many a mother. It is as if Earth assumes the curse for her children, bears their burden (cf., Wurst 2000). The ground (*ʿadamah*), the very essence of life-giving Earth, suffers for the lives that Earth creates together with God. Earth is a suffering Mother, suffering for us. Again there is a spiritual connection that we have rarely recognised. We have long acclaimed the suffering of Christ as spiritual. Dare we say the same about the suffering of Earth?

To view weeds such as thorns and thistles as evidence of a curse on the ground seems to reflect a rather anthropocentric approach. Such weeds are integral to the natural life of the soil. They may annoy some farmers, but play a vital role in the long term ecology of an area. Yet, the ground is explicitly cursed by God to punish humans.

And how does this Earth text close? With a dismal image of returning to dust and reminding us of our traditional funeral rites: ‘ashes to ashes and dust to dust’?

No! In the end, Earth receives her own back into her bosom. Earth is the womb to which humans return in death. The ground is the stuff of their being, the stuff they will again become in death. For us, the pairing of soul and body or spirit and flesh has long been part of our thinking. In death, we speak of their separation. Not so in this text. There is no return of the spirit or soul to another domain. The ground of Earth is the final resting place, the spiritual home to which the whole person returns.

The curse God pronounces on the ground after the Fall is but the first of many curses God imposes on Earth and the creatures of Earth because of human sins. Earth suffers vicariously—and it appears silently—for the wrongs of human beings throughout biblical history.

The flood narrative (Genesis 6-9) is another case of Earth suffering for the sins of humanity. The flood was a total destruction of all life, except for those species preserved in Noah’s ark. All vegetation would have been erased. After all, the Flood lasted 12

months. The forty days of rain were but one downpour in the flood event. If we accept the story as it stands, billions of species would have been destroyed. That is a curse of cosmic proportions, not a flood typical of extreme weather patterns.

The Flood is a virtual return to the primal scene at the beginning of Genesis with waters everywhere and Earth lying in darkness below (Gen. 1.2). The skies opened above, the deep opened beneath and the primal waters once again covered creation. Any new beginning would require a removal of the curse and a total renewal of creation—a new creation formed from the residue of the old.

It is appropriate then that on New Year's Day, Earth emerges from the waters as it did in the beginning on Day Three of the creation story. The pivotal moment in the Flood narrative, however, is when God responds to the offering of thanks given by Noah and says: 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind!' (8.21).

*In this word, God admits that Earth was cursed because of humans. Earth bore the curse of human sin. Earth has suffered vicariously.*

Admittedly God promises never to bring down another curse on Earth and destroy living creatures because humans have turned wicked. But the memory of an innocent Earth suffering for the sins of human beings cannot easily be erased.

The plagues of Egypt are another case in point. Hordes of frogs, gnats, flies and locusts affect more than the Egyptian Pharaoh. The whole landscape is cursed. Poisoning the Nile with blood affects all the creatures that depend on the Nile for water and sustenance. Disease on the camels, the donkeys and all the herds of the land means that innocent animals are cursed. In other words, Earth and the Earth community continue to suffer innocently at the hands of God.

We must now recognise, I believe, that Earth is indeed a parent who suffers vicariously and silently not only at the hands of humans but also at the hands of God. Earth becomes a type of Christ figure from the very beginning. We owe much to Earth—not the least being the pains she has endured to nurture us. Our spiritual connection with Earth is deeper than simply affirming that she is our primal parent. She has been suffering for us for a long time.

### **Groaning in Travail**

Perhaps the most powerful expression of Earth groaning is found in Romans 8.18-27. This text reveals that Earth and indeed all creation is suffering. Why? Because of the forces of destruction and the crimes against creation that reach back to the very first curse imposed on Earth after the Fall. Earth was subjected to futility, bondage and decay because of the sins of humanity, beginning with the sins of our primal parents. The key verses read:

For creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only creation but we ourselves, who have the fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (8.19-23)

Paul does not view creation as a lifeless mass of matter, but a subject with an inner longing, with deep empathy. Here the suffering of creation, however, is not one of resignation. Creation is waiting for renewal and liberation. Nor is creation suffering in silence. Creation is groaning aloud for those with Earth sensitive ears to hear.

The groans of creation are not the last gasps of a dying cosmos. Far from it! The Greek term used here refers to labour pains, the groaning of a woman in travail. Paul is signalling that Earth and all the rest of creation are active participants in God's plan for redemption and restoration.

*A groaning creation means that creation is suffering, feeling the pains of the injustices and crimes committed against creation. This groaning, however, is not an expression of self-pity. Creation groans in anticipation of a new beginning.*

The impulse for empathy burning in creation is also found in those with faith waiting for the day of restoration. Those who are moved by the Spirit also groan inwardly with creation. The logical outcome of creation in labour is a birth—creation gives birth to something new. This new world is free from the curses that bind creation to decay. Creation is giving birth to a new creation in which we will all participate and celebrate.

This birthing is not the release of human souls from this creation to some heavenly home. Through this birthing, says Paul, our bodies—and ultimately all bodies—will be redeemed and liberated. Creation is giving birth both physically and spiritually; creation is indeed a living mother.

There is a third party groaning as well. Creation groans with labour pains. Human beings with faith groan inwardly. And the Spirit of God groans. The Spirit 'intercedes with sighs too deep for words'. In the original Greek text, these sighs of the Spirit as it communicates with God on our behalf are described as 'unutterable groanings'. The passage unites creation, humankind and the Spirit through this series of 'groanings'. Together we—humans, creation and the spirit—groan for our birth and renewal.

This triple expression of groaning and travail is significant. The theology of empathy expressed here forces us to face again what is happening in creation. First, creation is groaning. This groaning is the climax of a long history of Earth being subjected to curses, devastation and desecration. The current ecological crimes against creation are an intensification of the suffering that Earth has been experiencing since humans first perpetrated sins of dominion. Earth as the planet that has nurtured life from the beginning has empathised with her kin and long suffered both with and for them.

Second, the Spirit is groaning. The Spirit is not a detached wind blowing across the landscape. The Spirit is more than a religious expression for the life that penetrates creation. The Spirit is God, God suffering with creation, God in the depths of Earth groaning with Earth. Here we meet the empathy of God, God suffering with and for creation. It is not only the presence of God that fills Earth, it is also the suffering Spirit of God. Our God is a suffering God in creation.

Third, humanity is groaning, waiting for our liberation. It is this third aspect of the theology of empathy expressed here that demands further attention. The empathy of Earth and the empathy of the Spirit reveal the agony of the eco-world in which we live. But how conscious are we of that world? Is our groaning as humans but a selfish longing for freedom? Or should we also have empathy for Earth together with the Spirit who gives us life?

### **Hearing the Cries**

Many of the Indigenous peoples of Earth have experienced the suffering of Earth and groaned deeply since the European invasion of their lands. Their spiritual kinship with Earth means that they are more sensitive to the cries of creation than most Western Christians. The words of Yunupingu reflect this pain.

Even when I am not on my tribal land I am able to speak sign language; just like people who don't speak each other's languages have communicated in sign language. I do the same by looking at the hills with no trees. I understand that maybe those hills are suffering a bit. I understand that Mother earth is suffering because there is so much devastation. Trees are dying and have to be cleared away, lands are cut by floodwaters and many other types of environmental destruction are taking place. That is when you experience the suffering of the Spirit of the Land because of the carelessness of non-Aboriginal people who call themselves 'owners' of this country. (Yunupingu, p. 9-10)

The suffering of the land reflects the suffering of the 'Spirit of the land', the spiritual presence in the land. In the words of the Rainbow Spirit Elders, 'the Creator Spirit is crying because the deep spiritual bonds with the land and the people have been broken' (1997, 42). The groaning of the creation and the Spirit that Paul hears and records in Romans 8 has its counterpart in the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples today.

One of the most powerful expressions of this experience is reflected in a brief poem by Mary Duroux.

My mother, my mother,  
    what have they done?  
Crucified you  
    like the Only Son?  
Murder committed  
    by mortal hand!  
I weep, my mother,  
    my mother, the land. (1992, 20)



We noted earlier how Earth suffered vicariously for the sins of the people; Earth suffered because of the wrongs committed by humanity against God and creation. Earth is indeed a Christ figure. In Mary Duroux's words, the profound abuse of her Mother, the land, can only be compared with what happened to the Crucified One. She now lives on crucified land, land that has suffered and in many places died because of human crimes against creation.

*The question we now face is whether we too can hear the groaning of creation, the cries of a crucified land? And if we can, how should we respond? If we endorse a theology of empathy, we need to find a way to translate it into liturgy. We need to incorporate into The Season of Creation more than sermonic allusions to the suffering of Earth. We need to raise our consciousness to the cries of creation against the injustices being experienced.*

At the very end of his oath of innocence, Job swears that he will let his land become thorns and weeds if the land has 'cried out' against him and its furrows 'wept together' (31.38-40). Job is sensitive to more than the need for justice in his community. He knows the cry of injustice that can rise from Earth (cf., Joel 1.10,18,20).

Clearly the suffering of creation today is far more extensive and serious than in Job's day. The cries of the fallen forest, the dying deserts and the polluted air rise daily from Earth. It is an axiom of social justice that the true nature, depth and force of any injustice can only be understood by those experiencing that injustice. Their voice must be heard first, taken with the utmost seriousness and made an integral part of the process of justice. So too with justice for Earth. We need to hear Earth and empathise with Earth—including all those pieces of the ecosystem that have been violated or abused.

There is another set of voices we need to hear—the groans of empathy. Not only does Earth cry out against injustice, but Earth also groans in empathy for and with those who have been hurting her. And that groaning of creation, as St Paul says, goes beyond the anguish of a victim to the anticipation of a mother about to give birth. The suffering of creation reflects both the exploitation by a dominant species and also a longing for redemption of that species—with all creation!

How we hear those voices during The Season of Creation is something we need to explore. One way is to include epistles from or about Earth. These may be letters written in the name of Earth by poets, prophets or priests who have a genuine spirit of empathy for Earth. Earth epistles could be read along with the lectionary for the day. A variation of this approach would be to write lamentations of the Spirit, reflecting the groaning of the Spirit empathising with Earth.

Another option is to develop prayers which go beyond asking God to care for our distressed creation and to respond with empathy to the specific cries, groanings and voices of Earth. These prayers would be designed both to evoke human empathy and unite us with the Spirit in the very groaning process—an extension of the birthpangs identified by Paul in Romans 8. Such prayers could take the form of letters addressed to Earth or members of the Earth community in much the same way that St Francis spoke personally to parts of nature.

## References

Duroux, Mary

1992 *Dirge for Hidden Art*. Morinya: Heritage Publishing.

Habel, Norman

1996 'The Crucified Land: Towards our reconciliation with Earth' *Colloquium*. 28, 3-18.

Hayes, Katherine M.,

2002 "'The Earth Mourns": Prophetic Metaphor and Oral Aesthetic'. *Academia Biblica*, 8. Atlanta: Society of Biblical literature.

Rainbow Spirit Elders

1997 *Rainbow Spirit Theology. Towards and Australian Aboriginal Theology*. (Melbourne: Harper and Collins).

Rasmussen, Larry L.

1998 *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll: Orbis).

Uehlinger, Christoph

1995 'The Cry of the Earth' Biblical perspectives on ecology and violence.' *Concilium* 1995/5, 41-57.

Wurst, Shirley

1999 'Beloved Come Back to me': Ground's Theme Song in Genesis 1-3' in Norman Habel and Shirley Wurst, *Earth Bible Volume Two: The Earth Story in Genesis*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 87-104.

Yunupingu, G

1996 'Concepts of Land and Spirituality' in A. Pattel-Gray *Aboriginal Spirituality, Past, Present and Future*. Melbourne: HarperCollins.