

*Chapter Two*

*Invitation and Gloria*

*based on*

***A Theology of Kinship with Creation***

**Invitation to Worship:**

We extend our worshipping community by inviting all our kin in creation to celebrate with us.

With the psalmists we not only praise God for creation but also worship with our kin in creation.

We are also conscious of relating to other creatures as our kin—including Earth as a primal parent.

**Gloria:**

We sing a *Gloria* that reflect our desire peace for on Earth, with Earth and with all our kin in creation.

## *Chapter Two*

# **Invitation to Worship: A Theology of Kinship with Creation**

### **A New Consciousness**

We have reflected on how our worship takes place in a sanctuary called Earth, a sacred site in our cosmos. Planet Earth is the ‘where?’ for our worship. We now ask ‘who?’ With whom do we celebrate in this blue-green sanctuary? Who do we invite to join us in worship, especially during a Season of creation? Who are the voices singing with us when we chant in this sanctuary called Earth?

Many Christian liturgies include references to all creation joining with the Christian community in praise. We find expressions like ‘joining in the hymn of all creation’, ‘let heaven and nature sing’ and ‘let all creation join in one, to praise his holy name.’ In most Christian liturgies, however, the voices of creation are more like a faint choir in the background. Rarely are we conscious of the creatures of Earth as active participants in our worship.

In our discussion of the theology of sanctuary above, we identified the need to ‘open our church windows’ and become conscious of the natural world around us as a sanctuary where God has chosen to reveal God’s presence. In this chapter we open the windows a little wider to be conscious of our kin in creation worshipping with us. We have acknowledged the background music of creation praising the Creator. We now need to become conscious of our kin in creation being active partners with us in lamentation and praise, in sacrament and song.

### **Barriers to Kinship**

Before we can consciously worship with our kin in creation, however, we need to face a major obstacle that prevents us from participating with more than fellow Christians who have a common faith orientation. This obstacle is more than the physical barrier of church walls, a gothic vision and stained glass windows that have been typical of

traditional worship contexts. This obstacle involves our faith understanding of our relationship to the animate and inanimate world around us.

In Western thought since the Enlightenment, Earth has generally been considered an 'it', inanimate matter that had no intrinsic worth. Earth was dead, not alive like humans—Earth was a non-personal resource for humans. Earth was material and in no way spiritual or spirit filled. Even worse, Earth was viewed as a team of natural forces that had to be harnessed. The Earth was wild and had to be tamed, an alien place that humans made their temporary home, a cursed piece of fallen creation that only reluctantly yielded up its treasures.

In most Western Christian teaching, human beings were believed to be of a totally different order of being than anything else in creation. Human beings alone bore the image of God; and that image was the mark that separated them from any other species. Humans really belong to the realm of God above, not the domain of dumb creatures below.

*The image of God was variously interpreted as human reason, a higher level of consciousness or the capacity to have a personal relationship with God. Whatever the interpretation of the image of God, it usually functioned to reinforce a sense of sharp separation between humans as personal and Earth as impersonal and therefore incapable of genuine worship.*

The theory of evolution emphasised that humans do have a biological connection with other creatures, but from an evolutionary perspective non-humans were usually viewed as inferior, without a developed brain or reason and lower in the hierarchy of beings. The thought of worshipping with inferior beings was considered taboo. The idea of singing chorales with dumb cattle was viewed as ridiculous. The suggestion that we should celebrate in some personal way with this 'it' called Earth was thought to be nothing short of paganism.

This dualistic perspective has become engrained in Western thought and Western Christianity, a perspective we will explore further in our next chapter. There is still a sense of deep separation between the spiritual and the material, between heaven and Earth, between spirit and matter. To view Earth as other than mere matter requires, for most of us, a radical change of consciousness. To consider worshipping with Earth demands something like an ecological conversion, a fresh recognition of our kin in creation.

### **The Primal Precedent**

One of the important theological movements to overcome this negative orientation to Earth was led by Matthew Fox who emphasised a creation spirituality. One of the significant sources of his theology was the domain of primal religion. Many Indigenous peoples experienced nature as spiritual and personal with Earth as mother and life as sacramental. (Fox, 1983)

Some, like Paul Santmire, arguing from a classical Christian perspective, have provided a significant critique of the theology of Fox. According to Santmire, Fox

...seeks to strip away what he considers to be the false theological constructions of so-called fall-redemption theology in order to reveal the original blessings of God in the created order, through the marvellous activity and wondrous manifestations of the eternal Logos of God. (Santmire, 2000, 19).

Without in any way negating the centrality of the fall-redemption theology of our Christian heritage, it is becoming increasingly apparent, I suggest, that the spirituality of Indigenous peoples may well have much to teach us. We need to recognise from the outset that God was present and alive in Indigenous lands long before colonial peoples invaded with the message of the Gospel. God did not leave these peoples without a witness of God's presence, a truth to which Paul repeatedly testifies. (Acts 17.22-28; Rom. 1.20)

These manifestations of the presence of God are evident in the faith and worship of many Indigenous peoples who discern the spiritual in creation. This experience of Earth as living and spiritual is confessed, for example, by Indigenous Christians in Australia. Two such experiences cited by the elders in *Rainbow Spirit Theology* testify to this experience. The first is by Patrick Dodson and the second by George Rosendale.

The land is a living place made up of sky, clouds, rivers, trees, the wind, the sand; and the Spirit has placed my own spirit there in my own country. It is something—and yet it is not a thing—it is a living entity. It belongs to me. I belong to it. I rest in it. I come from there. (Rainbow Spirit Elders, p. 32)

Aboriginal culture is spiritual. I am spiritual. Inside of me is spirit and land, both given to me by the Creator Spirit. There is a piece of land in me and it keeps drawing me back like a magnet to the land from which I came. Because the land, too, is spiritual! This land owns me. The one piece of land I claim to have a spiritual connection with—a connection between me and the land—is the piece of land under the tree where I was born, the place where my mother buried the afterbirth and umbilical cord. The spiritual link with that piece of land goes back to the ancestors in the Dreaming. This is both a personal and a sacred connection—between the land, me and my ancestors. (Rainbow Spirit Elders, p.12)

In an article called 'Creation as Kin: A Native American View' George Tinker articulates the respect his peoples have for all members of creation as kin. All are equal members of the family in the circle of creation. He writes:

The circle is a key symbol for self-understanding in these tribes, representing the whole of the universe and our part in it. We see ourselves as coequal participants in the circle, standing neither above nor below anything else in God's creation. There is no hierarchy in our cultural context, even of species, because the circle has no beginning or end. (1992, 147).

Tinker then outlines how this Indigenous perspective is reflected in certain rituals of the Lakota and Dakota peoples who use the phrase *mitakue oyasin* that functions somewhat like *amen* in Christianity. He adds,

The usual translation offered is "For all my relations". Yet like most Native symbols, *mitakuye oyasin* is polyvalent in its meaning. Certainly one is praying for one's close kin, aunts, cousins, children, grandparents, and so on. And relations can be understood as fellow tribal members or even all Indian people. At the same time, the phrase includes all human beings, all two-legged relatives of one another, and the ever expanding circle does not stop there. Every Lakota who prays this prayer knows that our relatives necessarily include the four-legged, the wingeds, and all the living, moving things in mother Earth. (p, 148)

These primal testimonies urge us to reconsider whether our own biblical heritage preserves a similar sense of the personal and spiritual in creation. Does the Bible reflect a sense of kinship with living creatures? Or does the concept of the image of God exclude any such consciousness of a living relationship with Earth or the non-human creatures of Earth? Are there traditions in the Bible that reveal deep bonds between humans and the rest of the natural world?

### **Kinship with Earth**

Traditionally kin and kinship have been associated with human relations and cultural systems. A closer consideration of these concepts in this context suggests that a wider interpretation of how we relate as kin also deserves attention.

Kin refers to those with whom we are related as a group, whether as family, clan or community. Kin have a common nature, origin, ancestor, spirit or quality. The relationship of kin is a given, implying specific ties and obligations. Kinship refers to this relationship and the affinity it embraces. Kinship systems are those systems that function in specific cultures, involving particular rights, duties and affiliations.

*Can we speak of a kinship with Earth? Or is the idea that Earth is our primal parent, mother or common ancestor simply a metaphor to reflect our biological roots? Do the Scriptures offer us any clues as to our relationship with Earth?*

Is Earth more than the material stuff from which I was created? Is Earth also a true parent with a deep impulse to nurture me as a child? Does the old image of mother nature evident in Indigenous cultures preserve a precious truth? Is there also a spiritual bond with Earth as our mother? These are some of the questions that keep stirring within us as we trace our connections with creation.

One of the clearest Earth readings that identify Earth as our mother is found in the opening chapter of the Book of Job. After being unjustly harassed by the God of heaven and deprived of all possessions, Job turns to Earth as his initial source of life and comfort. His words are famous.

Naked I came from my mother's womb,  
And naked I shall return there!  
YHWH gives and YHWH takes away!  
Blessed be the name of YHWH. (Job 1.21)

The God who sits in heaven making a wager with the Satan may intervene to give and take Job's possessions. Those in the heavenly council may play fast and loose with the life of Job. Ultimately, however, Job declares that his origin and his end are with his mother—Earth! When Job said he would return 'there', he meant Earth not heaven, his biological origins not his human mother or the high heaven from which God was hounding him.

It is clear from Job's speech in chapter 3 that the expression 'there' refers to Earth, the place where all humans reside when they die, whether they are taskmasters or slaves (Job 3. 17-18). That place is a place of rest for all. That place is home, the mother from which Job emerged, the source and solace of his life under harassment from heaven.

Psalm 139 includes a similar reference to Earth as mother. The Psalmist explores the wonder of human birth, the intricate mysteries of human embryos moulded every day by the Creator. The fascinating dimension of this portrait is that the poet begins by giving us the impression that the embryo is being delicately created in our human mother. As we read, we discover that there is another dimension, a deeper womb—mother Earth.

For you, you formed my inner being,  
You knit me together in my mother's womb!  
I praise you because I am an amazing creation.  
Your work is awesome!  
My spirit really knows that.  
My frame was not hidden from you  
When I was made in secret,  
Intricately woven in the depths of Earth. (139.13-15)

Earlier in the Psalm, the poet reflected on God's deep understanding of every aspect of the Psalmist's life and inner being. The spirit of God, the hidden divine presence, penetrates into even the most hidden crevices of the cosmos (139.7-8). The spirit is present when the embryo is formed, penetrating the depths of Earth. The spirit knows the impulse to give birth that lies deep in Earth and every mother. Every child is an Earth child.

The intricate and fragile birth process deep in Earth is an awesome and wondrous reality. This mystery of God in Earth enabling birth is more than an intellectual insight, a biological discovery. This mystery stirs in the Psalmist an impulse to praise. He has experienced that reality in person. Deep within his soul he knows that his Earth birth is true. There is a connection between the spirit of the poet, the creating spirit of God and the deep womb of Earth. They are bound together in the spiritual mystery of birth.

*This insight of the Psalmist, echoed by peoples of many ancient and Indigenous cultures, celebrates Earth as kin. Every child is an Earth child, forever linked as a family with a common ancestor, Earth. This is one of the mysteries of creation that invites us to worship with Earth in a Season of Creation.*

### **Kinship with Creatures**

Many traditions have long recognised Earth as a parent or mother, some in a spiritual or relational sense and some in a biological or even evolutionary sense. Does this mean that individual creatures or components of creation are also our kin in some sense. Or is this but a theological metaphor, a relic from our primal past?

First of all, it is now abundantly clear, from an ecological perspective, that human beings and all other living creatures have a common origin—Earth. We are all kin biologically. We share the same stuff and the same genes. This common origin of all life, including humans, from the diverse elements of Earth is now widely recognised by biologists and ecologists. Humans are 'born of Earth' as David Suzuki and others write. We have a common '*bios*' or life source. The earth, air, fire and water that have long been viewed as the elements of creation are all necessary for humans to exist—and indeed for the whole planet. As David Suzuki and Amanda O'Connell write:

Air, water, earth and fire—these are the substances that support all life. Together with the sum total of that life, they maintain the planet, keep it fit for life. As we explore each element in turn, looking at its origins, its function on the planet and our intimate relationship with it, we will begin to understand our indissoluble connection with the centre. We are creatures of the Earth, and everything we learn about the Earth teaches us about ourselves. (Suzuki, 1999, p. 38)

Or as Joanna Macy reminds us,

Matter is made from rock and soil. It, too, is pulled by the moon as the magma circulates through the planet heart and roots such molecules into biology. Earth pours through us, replacing each cell in the body every seven years. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, we ingest, incorporate and excrete the earth, are made from earth. I am that. You are that. (Macy, 1998)

Does the biblical record support this common origin? Is this sense of kinship strictly biological or is something more implied?

In Genesis Two, Earth is a parent of living beings. God moulds the first human (*adam*), and all the living creatures (except for Eve), from the ground (*adamah*) of Earth. There is a kinship from the beginning--common clay, common flesh. Similarly in Genesis 1.24, all animal life also comes from the *adamah* of Earth. God does not say, 'Let there be animals!' Rather God says, 'Let Earth bring forth all kind of animals'. Humans and all life are born of Earth; they are kin.

Out of that same ground that God used to form humans, God causes trees and vegetation to grow. Trees and humans have the same source, the same ground (*adamah*). It is not just *adam* who is made of *adamah*. All fauna and flora share the same origin, the same mother. The creation story of Genesis One offers a similar story of origin. God does not say, 'let there be vegetation'. Rather God says,

Let Earth put forth vegetation; plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with a seed in it. (Gen. 1.11)

This reading of Genesis Two points not only to a common origin and a sense of kinship between all living things, it also describes the location where life is born as a garden, a forest full of trees. This forest garden is a symbol of the home, the habitat God created, a place of rich vegetation, a location with a sense of close relationship between species, a centre from which waters flowed to give life to the land and a domain filled with trees of beauty and sustenance. The tree of life in the midst of that garden would appear to symbolise the very essence of that place: a forest garden of life. For us today that forest garden is none other than planet Earth.

*Kinship among the creatures in this forest garden also extends to breath, God's breath. All living things, like humans, are animated by God's breath. For humans to be born of Earth, they need the breath of life that comes from God.*

All births are ultimately animated with God's life breath, whatever form that may assume. Similarly all living creatures, all vegetation and the very ground itself are brought to life and nurtured by God's breath, as the psalmist confirms:



When you hide your presence they are dismayed,  
When you remove your Spirit/breath they expire  
And return to their dust.  
When you send for your Spirit/breath they are created  
And you renew the face of the ground. (Ps. 104.29-30)

Genesis Two, suggests, however, that we have more than a biological kinship with animals, birds and other living creatures. God does not create the animal kingdom simply to exist. These creatures are formed from Earth to be potential partners for the first human. The very idea of such a partnership is rather ludicrous if there is not something about other living creatures that includes an affinity with humans—an affinity that is more than biological.

There is ample evidence from literature and human experience that humans can form close personal relationships with particular animals and species. Some discover a deep personal bond between themselves and particular creatures. A number of Indigenous peoples speak of a totem or Dreaming relationship with a given species—a species with which they share a common spirit.

After making the animals and birds from ground, God brought them to Adam to see what he would name them. Adam thereupon names ‘every living creature’ and explores its potential as his partner. Some would argue that ‘naming’ something implies an expression of authority over that thing. But that is not necessarily the case. Naming can be an expression of kinship, celebration and community. When Ruth gives birth to a child, she hands the child over to Naomi who physically nurses the baby. However, neither Naomi nor the father name the child. The child is named Obed by all the women in the village. Naming here is an expression of communal kinship and solidarity. Similarly, the Genesis Two creation account is a story about the garden of life, the Earth family and how its members are related.

### **Worshipping with our Kin**

A number of leading scholars have recognised our kinship with nature in various ways. According to Karl Peters,

Our DNA code has evolved so that we are biological cousins of other higher primates and more distant relatives of everything else. According to the current scientific picture, we are all part of a unified system of evolving life on our planet. As theologian Philip Hefner says, “On the basis of these scientific perspectives, there is no doubt that *Homo sapiens* is nature’s creature. How are we related to the rest of nature? We are kin....Our kinship with nature is not a matter of our preference, nor is it an issue that calls for our acquiescence. It simply is.” Therefore, when I say that I am trying to change my mind so that I can see the natural world and all its creatures as native Americans see it, I am simply trying to come into touch with the way things are. We are all children of heaven and earth as Kaibara puts it. Being part of a natural family is scientifically supported with evidence. (p. 64)

*The biblical psalms suggest that this kinship is something more than a biological claim based on scientific evidence. The psalms call all the various parts of creation—both animate and inanimate—to rejoice and praise God. The Earth community is more than a biological complex; it is a celebrating community—a worshipping family.*

The Psalms frequently testify to Earth worshipping, to creation singing God's praises. Mother Earth is not a silent partner when we worship. Listen again to the following lines from Psalm 96:

Let the skies be glad and Earth rejoice!  
Let the sea roar and all that fills it!  
Let the field exult and everything in it!  
Then will all the trees of the forest sing for joy,  
Before the Lord, for God comes to rule Earth. (Ps. 96.11-13)

This Psalm calls on Earth, sea and sky to be filled with celebration and singing. In the past, many of us have tended to acknowledge that in some sense creation praises God, but we have not felt comfortable with joining the choir of creation, singing hymns with wallabies or raising songs of praise with a platypus.

Another deterrent to taking these Psalms seriously has been a tendency of teachers and preachers to read these Earth texts as imaginative poetry rather than as reflecting a spiritual reality. Our perception has been that 'Trees don't really sing!' and 'Paddocks don't really praise!' Humans and nature are two different orders of creation: humans are spiritual and have the capacity to believe, but nature is not spiritual and possesses neither reason nor soul. Creation does not literally praise God! These Psalms are just poetic metaphor!

Another example of creation responding in worship is Psalm 65.9-13. When God visits the forest garden called Earth with the blessings of water and fertility, the fields respond with life. The Psalm concludes:

The pastures of the wilderness overflow,  
The hills gird themselves with joy,  
The fields clothe themselves with flocks,  
The valleys deck themselves with grain.  
They shout and sing together for joy. (65.12-13)

This joyous portrait of Earth celebrating is frequently interpreted as a colourful set of images used to depict a rich season with an abundance of vegetation and life. Such an interpretation, however, devalues Earth by making it primarily a resource for human agricultural and pastoral pursuits. There is more than production in this passage. The landscape is alive with festivity, celebrating the seasons with shouts of joy. The singing may not sound like church choirs, but the spiritual message deserves to be heard. This singing and celebration implies, I suggest, that the creatures of Earth are our kin spiritually as well as biologically.

This reality seems to me to be quite explicit in Psalm 148, where the Psalmist calls on all the components of creation to praise God because they, like humans, have the spiritual impulse of the Word of God as their source. The Psalmist calls on Earth, the elements of Earth and the creatures of Earth to praise God. This colourful list includes sea monsters, fire, wild animals and birds. Everything from ants to atoms seems to be included.

Praise YHWH from Earth  
You sea monsters and all deeps,  
Fire, hail, snow and frost,  
Whirlwind doing God's word!  
Mountains and all hills  
Fruit trees and all cedars!  
Wild animals and all cattle,  
Creeping things and flying birds! (148.7-10)

The reason all creation should praise the name of the Lord is because it is the word of God that created them all (148.5). Humans like other parts of creation have the same spiritual impulse—the Word—as their driving force in life. That driving force means more than biological kinship. It means communal worship as the family of creation.

In The Season of Creation, it is appropriate therefore that we do more than routinely repeat these Psalms as part of our celebration, more than recognise that somewhere in the background our relatives—however distant—are also capable of rejoicing, more than acknowledge that perhaps in the past our Indigenous ancestors may have actually worshipped with creation. The Season of Creation provides us with an opportunity to worship *with* creation and not simply praise God *for* creation.

Worshipping with creation involves at least two significant changes to our traditional worship pattern. It involves actually inviting our kin in creation to worship with us in such a way that we are genuinely conscious of their presence and we pray and sing. It also involves becoming conscious of their worshipping patterns in the world and in some way learn to join them in their worship—at least in spirit. In other words, this is a two way process: they join us in our worship and we join them in their worship.

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