

Ecological Mourning The Christian Response

Introduction

This paper invites us to explore together the dimensions of Christian Ecological Mourning so that we can integrate it into the *Living Green Mission*.

As a starting point we can note the perilous state of our emerging world – we are at a tipping point: some scientists would say that we have already passed the point of no return. The media present disasters on a daily basis, and books on our crisis abound, such as W Sebald: *The Natural History of Destruction*, 2004 and David Wallace Wells: *The Uninhabitable Earth*, 2019, which begins with the apocalyptic statement: ‘It is worse, much worse than you think!’. *Laudato Si*’ is categorical: ‘The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth’ (21). ‘Who turned the wonder-world of the seas into underwater cemeteries bereft of colour and life?’ (41). Moreover, the Sixth Mass Extinction of Species has begun.

How can we redemptively cope with Ecological Disaster?

Disasters can lead to a great outpouring of creative energy, but also to grief, anxiety, desolation, depression, paralysis, fatalism and suicide. Must I file disastrous facts away and become anaesthetised to them? Does my spirituality of finding God in all things include finding God in ecological disaster? I suggest that it does, through redemptive mourning. ‘Those who do not learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them’ as George Santayana said. Unless we deeply mourn what we have already done to Creation in the Anthropocene Era, we will not be living in the truth, and we will continue our destructive ways and repeat former patterns. The good we may do, even at great cost, will be to a greater or lesser degree undone by our

continuing the behaviours that created our crisis. Our Green Mission will founder.

Ignoring redemptive mourning leads to the recurrence of Wrong-doing

The *Book of Jeremiah* from the 6th century BCE, is a paradigm of redemptive mourning: the people sin, but over and over the prophet calls them to repentance, with the promise of safe return and restoration after their exile in Babylon. Yahweh is revealed as the lord of history who orchestrates all things in accord with his everlasting love for his wayward people. ‘I will visit you and fulfil my promise... I know the plans I have for you... plans for your welfare and not for harm... When you search for me you will find me... I will restore your fortunes and bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile’ (*Jer* 29:10-14).

The slaughter in North America of indigenous Indians by Spaniards around 1520 left 20 million killed. But who mourned these Indians? Instead those who survived became the enemy, to be eliminated by the settlers who saw themselves as on a divine mission to create the new Garden of Eden. Now a new racism is rife, leading to the challenge: Do Black Lives Matter?

After World War II and the Holocaust there emerged an implicit pact across Germany not to reflect and acknowledge what had happened: the focus instead was to be the rebuilding of the economy. *The Inability to Mourn* by A & M Mitscherlich, 1967, studies the collective suppression of guilt re the Third Reich. Nazism, they found, was to be interpreted as something like ‘an infectious childhood disease’ for which only Hitler and his comrades were to blame. Guilt, shame, grief, and empathy were dismissed. Though Germany had started the war that ended in the division of Germany, the enemy were those

now behind the Wall in East Berlin. This provocative book initiated a coming to terms with a terrible past through analyzing the reigning taboos. This new culture of remembrance can be a model for others for others to follow. It offers a counter-balance to the current emergence of Neo-Nazism.

The exploding of the Atom Bomb in 1945, instead of halting the Armaments Industry, has led to its phenomenal growth as the biggest industry in the world, at \$1822b in 2018. It has also created the phenomenon of 'Mutually Assured Destruction' (MAD).

After the 1947 founding of the State of Israel, the Jews did not redemptively mourn their Holocaust, and instead began the persecution of the Palestinians.

Ireland's Child Sexual Abuse scandal has accelerated the current collapse of the Irish Catholic Church. From the 1960's on, many knew that things were very wrong, but few protested. When they did they were silenced. As Derek Scally puts it in *The Best Catholics in the World*: Dublin, 2021: *'This book is not about taking sides but is an embrace of ambivalence, suggesting an informed and respectful discussion of the deep-rooted trauma of our Catholic legacy. Keeping the past as it is, buried in its shallow grave, leaves us stuck in a home-made limbo. If we don't want to know what's buried, or if we know and continue to deny it, we ensure that anything new we build over this grave risk repeating unconsciously and in new forms, the structural flaws of the past... Are we ready to own our past?'* (301-2).

Ten days after the September 11, 2001 attack on the Twin Towers in New York, President Bush announced that we had finished grieving and now needed resolute action to take the



place of grief. So much for a period of redemptive mourning!

We must include the work of redemptive eco-mourning as an integral dimension of our Living Green Mission. Christian Eco-mourning, as part of Christian consciousness, will play an essential role in the healing of the planet, by alerting us to what is wrong in our ways of living and liberating us to live more genuinely the values of the Gospel. Grief-work holds the mystery of pain and evil in a steady and loving gaze: out of this contemplative stance emerges compassion and conversion.

Each of us may ask: *Do I find myself mourning the destruction of creation? If Yes, how can I respond creatively to it? Can Ecological Grief/Mourning become a dynamic and redemptive reality that is integrated into my spirituality and my pastoral approach?*

1. Redemptive Moments in Christian Mourning

I suggest various moments in Christian mourning, in the confident belief that the Holy Spirit who is among us will inspire each of us to do what is best suited to our unique situations.

Firstly, we must allow the reality of our ecological crisis to enter deeply into our souls: if we live in denial the destruction will continue unchecked. *Only the truth will set us free* (Jn 8:32). Currently the deep warnings of Covid 19 are not yet being adequately heard: as TS Eliot says: We have the experience but miss the meaning.

'The ecological crisis is a summons to profound interior conversion. It must be said that some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. Others are passive: they choose not to change their habits and thus become inconsistent. So, what they all need is an 'ecological conversion' whereby the effects of their encounter with

Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience' (LS 218).

2. Love and Mourning

With an ever-deepening realization of what is wrong must come a deeper love of Creation. Reflection on the mystical passages of *Laudato Si* can be helpful here: I have gathered these in a booklet for easy reference: see the Reading List below. Loving and mourning go hand in hand: what I love little, I mourn little if it disappears. Redemptive mourning arises only when I realize that in the ravaging of Nature, part of my very being is gone, because I am a part of Nature: I attend a little funeral of Nature, and die a little death myself. I am the less for the disappearance of every detail of bio-diversity. I must allow myself to experience emotionally the pain of Mother Earth: *'We can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement' (LS 89).*

3. Mourning is linked to shame and sorrow for sin.

In this step I acknowledge that I am complicit in the sin against creation. *'Is it I, Lord?' 'Yes'.*

Pope Francis tells us: *'Patriarch Bartholomew has spoken in particular of the need for each of us to repent of the ways we have harmed the planet, for inasmuch as we all generate some ecological damage, we are called to acknowledge our contribution to the disfigurement and destruction of creation. For human beings to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation; to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins. To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin*

against ourselves and a sin against God' (LS 15). 'A healthy relationship with creation.... entails the recognition of our errors, sins, faults and failures, and leads to heartfelt repentance and desire for change' (LS 218). This well describes ecological mourning, repentance and amendment.

4. The Gift of Tears

The gift of tears for sin is cherished in the contemplative tradition, and we need in our times to explore its richness as a remedy for sin against Creation. *'Tears for lost places, for a whole lost world of possibilities. Also, tears born of gratitude for what has been, for what might yet be retrieved and restored. Tears as a source of renewal. Tears as a gift. This is how the Christian monastics of the fourth century Egyptian desert thought about tears' (D. Christie: *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology*, 74).*

Tears are a gift: they make walls crumble and they break open the human heart. The heart of stone becomes flesh. Tears sear our souls, and break down pride and self-sufficiency: fragility and vulnerability take their place. Tears wash away sin and bring intimacy and closeness: we see some things rightly only with eyes that have wept.

Redemption begins when we identify with Jesus who weeps over the loss of what he loves.

- We can contemplate him at the grave of Lazarus, and learn that this divine weeping is born of his love. *'The one you love is sick' (Jn 11:3).* But the sharp edge now is that it is we who have brought this mortal sickness on the Creation God loves. We take our place with Martha in speaking with Jesus.
- We can sit with him as he weeps over the Jerusalem he loves, which is soon to be destroyed (*Lk 19:41-44*), and watch him weep over his ravaged Creation.
- We can watch and pray in Gethsemane as he weeps not just for himself but for the Sin of the World – he carries the sin that we inflict on Creation, and the grief and

suffering we bring thereby to innocent and good people, especially the poor.

- On the *Via Crucis* we meet him and he commands us to weep: ‘Weep for yourselves and for your children’ (Lk 23:28). This command has new resonances today: we speak with him about the sort of world we are handing on to our children, and allow ourselves to weep with him.
- We can weep with Creation, as he does: ‘For a long time I have held my peace... Now I will cry out like a woman in labour: I will gasp and pant’ (Is 42:14-15). ‘There is a time to weep... a time to mourn’ (Eccl 3:4). Creation is now in mourning, in agony, and we are part of Creation. ‘The vineyard is ruined, desolate, it mourns to me’ (Jer 12:11).
- Gazing at the Crucified One (Jn 19:37), we can include all Creation as suffering with him. The mystery of grace through which all created reality is healed is hidden here.

Note that in Scripture ‘mourning’, ‘weeping’ and ‘tears’ each occur more than 70 times. *Metanoia*—conversion, is hard work. It involves a re-creating of us, ‘from hearts of stone to hearts of flesh’ (Ez 36:26) and carries all the pain of heart-surgery! But this mourning is cleansing, graced, life-giving, redemptive, because it flows from God.

5. Now our trust in God has to grow!

Do we believe that God can and will intervene to save the world? ‘God loves the world so much...’ (Jn 3:16): can we believe that? Jesus is either Lord of all, or he is lord of nothing, so Thomas’ statement: ‘My Lord and my God’ (Jn 20:28) takes on new meaning. We are challenged here to a new appreciation of God’s greatness and providence. Let Jeremiah’s image sustain us in dark times:

*I went down to the potter’s house,
and there he was, working at his wheel.
The vessel he was making of clay was
spoiled in his hand,
and he reworked it into another vessel, as
seemed good to him.*

*Then the word of the Lord came to me:
‘Can I not do with you, O house of Israel,
just as this potter has done?’ says the Lord.
Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so
are you in mine’ (Jer 18:3-6).*



6. Intercession for Creation

We are to be delegates of prayer for humankind in pain; we may be few in number, but we are tasked as intercessors for the world. We take our place with the solitary figures of Abraham (Gn 18), Moses (Ex 32:14) and Jesus (Lk 22:39-46). Pope Benedict XVI quotes an ancient author: ‘The human race lives thanks to a few: were it not for them, the world would perish’ (*Spe Salvi*, 15). The great biblical scholar Bultmann says: ‘Prayer is to move God to do something which he otherwise would not do’.

Intercession demands great faith; it hopes against hope; it does not cease until what is asked is given; it trusts that ‘with God, all things are possible’—this theme recurs ten times in Scripture, from Gn 18:14 to Lk 18:27. Intercession has an extraordinary force. It calls God’s future into the present. New alternatives become feasible. ‘The unexpected becomes suddenly possible because people on earth have invoked heaven, the home of the possibles, and have been heard’ (Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 299).

We who engage in redemptive mourning for Creation are not left to bear its suffering alone. Jesus handed over his suffering to his Father, the God of all consolation: the trinitarian dynamic operates. He was

comforted, and we shall be too. *'Blessed are those who weep; they shall be comforted'* (Mt 5:8). *'His prayer was heard'* (Hb 5:7), and our prayer also shall be heard. Consolation comes also in our actions for the planet because we are in tune with God. *'Come to me, all you that labour... I will refresh you'* (Mt 11:28). 'I bandage, but God heals' – so said Sigmund Freud, quoting a surgeon. We labour but it is God who *'makes things grow'* (1Cor 3:6), and we can see this happening when we get the order of things right.

We can include Creation in our regular prayer: see E Johnson: *Creation & the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril*. Be inclusive, she says: let the word 'US' stand for 'All', wherever possible. We already pray: *'You save animals and humans alike'* (Ps 36:6). So let us pray: *'May God be gracious to us ALL and bless us All'* (including Creation) (Ps 67); *'Have mercy on us ALL'* (Ps 123); *'He took flesh and dwelt among us ALL'* (Jn 1:12); *'Emmanuel'* means *'God is with us ALL'* (Mt 1:23); *'God will raise us (ALL)'* (1C 6:4); *'In him we ALL live and move and have our being'* (Ac 17:28). Psalms 104 and 148 enable us to find our place within the great panorama of Being, not as its lords and dominators, but in fellowship with all that is.

7. Eco-conversion

This will mean the ending of a self-indulgent style lived at the expense of creation. Pope Francis' 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* offers a vision of a world in harmony, based on reverence for all, including reverence for creation. Francis' new book, *Dare to Dream*, 2020, challenges us to make this vision a reality.

R W Kimmerer in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, which has been described as a hymn of love to the world, unfolds the concept of *Reciprocity*. To maintain harmony between Nature and ourselves, she proposes that we learn the ways of Nature who cares for us, so that we may care rightly for her. We

are the ones who come asking for life from her.

'Introduce yourself: ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer. Never take the first, nor the last. Take only what you need. Never take more than half. Leave some for others. Harvest in a way that minimizes harm. Never waste what you have taken. Share. Give thanks for what you have been given. Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken' – p. 183.

The Christian community is to be prophetic as we witness to Christian love and hope for the world. Communal discernment helps us to engage and to lobby effectively to bring about the massive changes which our crisis requires.

Summary

Among the People of God many are working hard to protect the planet. But good people can have a Messiah-like mind-set, as if their bright ideas and plans will solve the crisis. There is however no merely human solution to our problem, so I am proposing that while we commit ourselves to doing what we can, we must embed creative mourning in Christian practice and ritual, and acknowledge with *Laudato Si'* that the root of our crisis lies within our warped relationship with Creation and its Creator. Else we will be 'building on shallow graves' and will repeat our errors. Mourning must be searingly honest: 'We have sinned!' This admission brings us along the path to amendment. For example: if our challenge is to provide enough energy for the world, should we turn to fracking or to nuclear energy? Or must our focus be on reducing our energy NEEDS, and on identifying new and safer sources of energy? Mourning that is redemptive brings good from evil. Well-made decisions follow the promptings of God and become part of the comprehensive divine solution, for the new heavens and earth come from the One *'who makes all things new'* (Rev 21:5), and who will bring about *'the universal restoration'* that is promised (Acts 3:21).