

GAZE AT THE BEAUTY OF THE GREEN EARTH

A talk by Rev Martin Wroe

There is a door in this church that leads you into the future.

But also into the past.

It's that one, just over there and after this service I invite you to take your oat latte and walk through it.

In the garden turn left down the side of the church and in ten steps a new shed blocks your view of the vicarage garden.

Next to the shed are two huge cylindrical fans.

This is our newly installed air-source heating system which will heat this place.

It works like an inside-out fridge. It captures heat from outside – even in below-zero temperatures - and moves it inside.

It's powered by electricity and up on that roof there we're installing solar panels.

Green electricity to run our green heat pump.

We're harnessing the properties of this universe – air and sun - to keep us warm when the weather is cold.

Our air-source heat pump is a step into a future where we are not heating up the planet to keep ourselves warm.

(A report this week said that wind and solar will produce a third of global power by 2030.)

A future where burning oil and gas does not smother earth with pollution, trapping heat which causes extreme weather events, which causes floods and fires and impossible to live in temperatures.

This week the world recorded the three hottest days in history.

But the heat pump and solar panels are also a step backwards.

Back to a world where we understood that everything is connected.

Nine hundred years ago a Benedictine nun called Hildegard, living in the German city of Bingen, used to have visions when she said her prayers.

She was inspired to see what she called God's 'living power of light' in all creation.

She named this power, in Latin, *viriditas*.

Hildegard was seeing the interconnectedness of everything.

In the C12th she seems to have understood how plants transform the sun's light into energy... what today we call photosynthesis.

The divine presence, this holy world, each sacred creature – we are all infused with light.

Amelia captured this earlier in Solar Psalm, her new version of Psalm 23.

*The Lord is my Solar Panel,
I shall not be in the dark.
He makes me energised and strong,
leading me into hope.*

Viriditas has been described as the greening of things.

Hildegard in Bingen was also a gardener. And Jean and Sam will tell you that good thoughts arrive in the garden. Weeding one day in the C12th Hildegard said

‘Gaze at the beauty of the green earth... now think.’

In the time since we did think but some of our thoughts became dangerous.

We began to think of Earth as simply a resource.

A tank to drain, a forest to raze, a home to ransack.

But Hildegard was thinking differently.

She was having the same thought that Francis of Assisi had a century or so later, when he talked of Brother Sun and Sister Moon, when he mused on Sister Water, Brothers Wind and Air. Of Mother Earth.

Francis wasn't thinking of Earth as a resource but as a relative.

That was a common thought in other ancient cultures but today it's been marginalised.

We've moved from a relational view of this universe to an instrumental view.

From earth as holy ground to earth as building ground.

From ecstatic to extractive.

Maybe this was accelerated when industrialisation moved so many of us into cities.

We lost sight of the shiftings seasons captured in the fields, forgot how we all spring from this earth and autumn into it.

Lost our sense of interdependence with earth.

How all of life connects.

The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who died last year, came up with a new word to capture the interconnectedness of everything.

He talked of 'interbeing'.

How this planet is a living, breathing cell.

How we do not live in nature but we *are* nature.

This pot of Nutella used to be a bunch of hazelnuts but today it has become a clunky literary contrivance to take us to Julian, who we heard about in our second reading.

Julian is not a man.

She is a woman born in Norwich about 150 years after Hildegard.

She lived at the time of a great Plague which killed 1.5m of the 4m people then on these islands.

When she was thirty she also nearly died - a priest administered the last rites - but she recovered and started to see things.

Wild things.

She had a series of visions - 16 to be precise - where Jesus appeared to her and showed her stuff.

This all happened in the month of May, in Norwich, 650 years ago.

These 'shewings', as they were called, were so powerful that Julian decided to become an anchoress, living alone in a room attached to a church on Norwich High St.

The Church of St Julian, that's how she got her name.

A life of prayer, contemplation and counselling.

In return for safety, food and clothing, anchorites like Julian offered the community spiritual advice.

They might have three windows from their little room - one to receive communion from the priest, one to receive food and one opening on the street for their spiritual citizens advice bureau.

Julian wrote up her visions in a book called The Revelations of Divine Love - the first book written in English by a woman.

She also saw that everything was connected. Like her hazelnut vision read earlier.

'He showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, and to my understanding it was round as any ball.

I looked upon it and thought: What may this be? And I was answered:

It is all that is made.

I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might fall into nothing because of its littleness.

And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always shall, for God loves it; and so all things have being through the love of God.

In this little thing I saw three properties.

The first is that God made it.

The second that God loves it.

And the third, that God keeps it.'

Julian saw our entire universe in a hazelnut - that everything exists and is sustained because...

'God made it, God loves it, God keeps it.'

Along with Hildegard and another genius German called Meister Eckhardt, she inspired a way of thinking called Creation Spirituality which finds a sacred relationship between people and planet and God.

In cities like this one, a step removed from the genesis of our food in the good earth, it's more difficult to notice that all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above.

The connection between the land around us and the plate on our table is broken.

We no longer plough the fields and scatter good seed on the land. We plough the aisles of Morrisons or Waitrose for produce originally scattered around the planet.

We do not think of our food as fed and watered by God's almighty hand.

We think of it as regulated by the Food Safety Standards Authority.

We vaguely know our food comes from everywhere but we only think about it if the supply line to our table is disrupted.

If bad weather on another continent leads to crop failures and our supermarket prices rise.

But the stories of Jesus recorded in the good book were rooted in an agrarian society, the kind many people in the world still live in.

His stories have fig trees, labourers in vineyards, landowners, fishing families, barnbuilders, tenant farmers, good shepherds, lost sheep.

Life was about the harvest – get a good one, store it in your barn, it will feed you until the next one.

Some of the earliest Christians knew about interbeing, about viriditas.

They found God all around.

They talked of two books of revelation - one book was the Bible, the other was the Book of Nature.

‘Creation,’ said Anthony of Egypt in the C4th, ‘Declares in a loud voice its Maker and master.’

Maximus, in the C7th, put it more vividly – the whole world he said is a ‘cosmic liturgy.’

As if in every moment of every day on this sacred globe we’re in a mystical drama in which God reveals herself.

Everything is connected.

Earth is sacrament, mediating the presence of the divine.

And this fragile ecosystem – this viriditas, this green life force – can be damaged.

If we suffocate it with our carbon emissions and tear down the forests then we heat the oceans which sets off terrifying flooding or nightmarish droughts or sea-rises that make regions unliveable and trigger mass migration.

Everything is connected.

Sister Dorothy Stang moved from the US to live among the poorest people in Brazil’s Amazon Basin.

She ran schools and studied Brazilian law to support local forest dwellers in their stand against corporations exploiting the Amazon.

She wore a t-shirt which read, ‘The death of the forest is the end of our lives’ and she wouldn’t be silenced even in the face of death threats.

Local farmers, she said, want to ‘live and work with dignity while respecting the environment.’

In February 2005, walking alone in the jungle, two gunmen came out of the bushes. Opening her Bible she started reading the Beatitudes of Jesus to them: ‘Blessed are the poor...’

She was shot dead at 73 years of age.

Some people have called Sister Dot the Patron Saint of Extinction Rebellion and at her funeral a local farmer stood up and said, 'Sister Dot, we are not burying you; we are planting you.'

A report last week found that deforestation in Brazil's Amazon has fallen by a third since a new President was elected last year.

Perhaps he understands that God is in the forest.

If we see God in a hazelnut or an apple, if we see her loving presence in the person sitting next to us, it transforms how we live our lives.

If we see our world and all its creatures as a Book of God, revealing the divine on every page, the story changes.

If we think of Earth as relation not resource we think of life differently.

'Humanity take a good look at yourself,' said Hildegard of Bingen in the C12th. 'Inside, you've got heaven and earth, and all of creation. You're a world - everything is hidden in you.'

'Gaze at the beauty of the green earth. Now think...'