

Reflections on
FOREST SUNDAY

Bathurst Uniting Church, 6 September 2020

Theme: Our interconnectedness with the Spirit and Nature

1. Introduction: Forest Sunday

Today is the first Sunday in the series of church's reflections focused on the "Season of Creation", and we begin this Sunday with our thoughts centred on the topic of 'Forest', and to guide us I have chosen the theme: "Our interconnectedness with Spirit and Nature".

Imagine if we are flying on a plane across the Amazon basin in South America, we would view an incredible expanse of canopy of the thick rainforest in the region. Under the canopy are an amazing variety of tropical trees, and the undergrowth is teeming with all kinds of wild life. The rainforest not only sustains its undergrowth, its fauna, and its human inhabitants, but it also emits much needed life-saving oxygen into the air of our Planet Earth.

Imagine again. If we are fortunate enough to find ourselves in a quiet and peaceful place, and experience the peace and tranquillity of the dawning of a new day, or falling of the twilight as the day draws to an end, and we hear the chirping and songs of a variety of birds coming from tree tops. Think of the beautiful sounds of the birds, together with the glorious rays of the rising or the setting sun radiating gently through the tree tops, and our spirits are stirred to give praise to God the Creator Spirit for the beauty of his creation. And we think of the words of the Psalmist: "*All trees of the forest sing for joy*" (Psalm 96:12).

Then we turn on the TV and we hear the news of the devastating bush fires, like those in the Amazon basin and here in Australia, mercilessly destroying the forest, our hearts sink. The wild life is destroyed, people and their property are in ruins, the Mother Earth groans in pain, and God the Creator Spirit is in pain with us. We are all interconnected with Nature and Spirit, and when one part of our Planet Earth is in dire trouble, we all feel the pain together physically and in spirit.

2. Genesis 2: 4b-22: Created out of the Mother Earth

This reading from Genesis takes our minds back to the Garden of Eden, to the very beginning of the creation and to its pristine stage, where there was perfect harmony between the creation and the Creator Spirit. It evokes in us the marvel and the vibrancy of creation from the formless to the teeming with life. All the forms of life that there is on our Planet Earth was brought into existence. *"And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good"* (Genesis 1:31).

As I reflected on the creation account in relation to our topic on the "Forest Sunday", I came to a renewed realisation of the close affinity of the forest, humanity and the Mother Earth. In the Garden, the Creator Spirit planted all kinds of trees (1:11), *"out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food ..."* (2:9a). The common denominator between the forest trees and humanity is that they were created out of the womb of the Mother Earth.

There is, then, a very close bond between the forest, humanity and the Mother Earth – an inherent sacred interconnected relationship, the handiwork of the Creator Spirit. In Melanesia, in that part of the Pacific where I come from, there is a strong belief among my people in the underlying spirituality of the Mother Earth, the forest and human beings and their interconnectedness. And it is said that the Mother Earth, or the land, and the forest are "the life-blood of Melanesian communities

3. Psalm 139:13-16: Wonder of intricate creation

The Psalmist praises the Creator Spirit, as he is overwhelmed by "God's amazing power seen in creation" and his all-knowing and "everywhere-presentness". He is in awe as he reflects on the mystery of the process of creation, of being created intricately in the depth of the Mother Earth, and the continuing work of the Creator Spirit in his creation. *"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? ... For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully*

made ... My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth" (Ps. 139:7, 13-15).

In the dark depth of his mother's womb, the Creator Spirit was not only masterfully weaving together every fabric of his being, but he was also protecting, caring and nurturing him, and breathing the mystery of life into him. And with deep insight, the Psalmist drew an analogy of his mother's womb and the womb of the mother Earth. He perceived that he was being put together in the dark depth of his mother's womb, as if he was created in the dark depth of the Mother Earth.

The analogy of the mother's womb and the womb of the Mother Earth, appropriately extends our imagination to the same mysterious creative process to the forest, individual trees and plants. Imagine the plant life in the thick rainforest and other types of forests. Seeds from the tall trees fall to the floor of the forest and there the Mother Earth takes over the process of creating the seeds to become forest plants. The same process occurs when the birds carry the seeds and drop them whether in the forest or in the home gardens. The human hands are also needed to help the Mother Earth as she produces a variety of tree plants which are pleasant to human eyes and to the natural environment. In the mysterious process of the intricate creation on the Planet Earth, there is a marvellous interconnectedness and partnership with the humans, the Mother Earth and the Creator Spirit, who infuses life into all creation in his grace. With the Psalmist, we say *"I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful. Wonderful are thy works!" (Ps.139:14 RSV).*

We live and have our existence in God the Creator Spirit. He is like the oxygen from the forest we breathe into our lungs. The Psalmist in our reading (Ps.139) was in awe of how the presence of the Creator Spirit permeated all of his life from the moment of his conception. In fact we see the presence of the Creator Spirit in all of creation, in the birds singing on the tree tops, in the all-pervading golden rays of sunset streaming through the tree leaves, in the baby crying as it is born from the mother's womb, and the seedlings sprouting mysteriously in the rainforest from the womb of the Mother Earth. All of creation describes the unseen presence and the glory of the Creator Spirit, even in unspoken words (Psalm 19:1-4). As Paul said, *"Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Romans 1:20).*

4. Acts 17: 22-28: Living and moving in the Spirit of creation

In our Epistle reading, Paul said to the people in Athens that if they were seeking God, if they wanted to know him, they did not have to look far, because *"In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).*

5. John 3: 1-16: From the Garden of Eden to the Garden of Gethsemane

The gardens of Eden and Gethsemane involved crucial choices which humanity had to make – life or death choices. The paradox of Eden was that in a paradise, where there was harmonious and perfectly interconnected existence between the Creator Spirit, humanity and the whole creation, there was rebelliousness. Adam the first parent of humanity rebelled against the expressed word of God, thus breaking the balanced and perfect existence between the Creator Spirit and the whole of the created order, which has resulted in pain, death, separation and decay. In contrast, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus knelt to pray to the Father in the midst of a few scattered stunted olive trees, where he had to make a decisive life changing choice. Whereas Adam disobeyed God, Jesus was obedient even to the death on the cross.

God the Creator Spirit had a master plan for the renewal of humanity and creation, which he put in motion in the mystery of appearing of Jesus at a particular moment in history. Jesus' death on the cross was a supreme act of love for the "world" – the "world" of creation and of humanity. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16). Jesus brought a radical new beginning, "a new quality of life – eternal life", to be experienced and lived out on our Planet Earth. To experience and participate in the new process of creation and recreation, "believing" in and working in partnership with the Spirit of God is essential for the faith community and for the whole humanity and creation. It may be difficult for us to see any apparent change or transformation, and we may be disheartened by the pain, suffering, destruction and disharmony around us, but "believing" means also the eyes to see that God the Creator is still working out his master plan of renewal, in Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

6. Interconnected with the spirituality of our natural environment

We are in awe when we think about the complex interaction of eco-organisms with the natural environment, in a give and take, reciprocal or shared relationship. There is a life-giving flow of energy in the interconnectedness of the organisms and their natural environment. As humans we have a sense of responsibility of caring for the eco-environment. But beyond this consciousness of stewardship, we are also part of the environment, and of creation, because we 'live in it' and we 'move, live and have our being in it'. In addition, we are aware of the spirituality of the environment around us. As I have alluded to earlier, in my Melanesian world, there is an understanding of the close relationship between the spiritual world and the physical world, in which there is a reciprocal inter-flow of energy. In the creation in

its pristine stage on our Planet Earth, there was a perfect flow of life-giving energy between the environment, humanity and the spiritual world, in an interconnected, give and take, relationship.

The destruction of our forests and their eco-organisms through ruthless logging, or through natural bush fires, or by arsonists, is both a symbol and a symptom of the broken relationships in "Our interconnectedness with the Spirit and Nature". When the forests and their eco-environment are destroyed, the wild life suffers, we are in pain, the Mother Earth is in pain, and the Creator Spirit shares in our pain and suffering, because we are all mysteriously interconnected, and the inter-flow of life-giving energy is disrupted. The mystery of Jesus' death on the cross started the process of renewing the whole of creation. But the creation still groans to be set free (Romans 9:19ff). *"Because man is part of nature, when he sinned, he brought pain and death not only on himself but on the whole created world. So, in the day man is transformed, the creation will share his transformation. There will be 'a new heaven and a new earth' Revelation 21:1"* (The Lion Handbook to the Bible, p.585). On that day our interconnectedness with Spirit and Nature will be fulfilled. This is the hope we hold onto in faith. AMEN.

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