

## CHRISTIAN FOUNDATIONS OF HEALING AND RECONCILIATION

*Why, who makes much of a miracle?  
As to me, I know of nothing else but miracles,  
Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,  
Or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky,  
Or wade with naked feet along the beach just in the edge of the water,  
Or stand under trees in the woods,  
Or talk by day with any one I love, or sleep in the bed at night  
with any one I love,  
Or sit at table at dinner with the rest,  
Or look at strangers opposite me riding in the car,  
Or watch honey bees busy around the hive of a summer forenoon,  
Or animals feeding in the fields,  
Or birds, or the wonderfulness of insects in the air,  
Or the wonderfulness of the sundown, or of stars shining so  
quiet and bright,  
Or the exquisite delicate thin curve of the new moon  
in spring;  
These with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles,  
The whole referring, yet each distinct and in its place.  
To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,  
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle,  
Every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread with the same,  
Every foot of the interior swarms with the same.*

*To me, the sea is a continual miracle,  
The fishes that swim-the rocks-the motion of the waves-  
the ships with men in them,  
What stranger miracles are there?*

I first read this poem by Walt Whitman when I was about fifteen. I loved it then, and I love it still. It struck me with all the force of recognition, that experience of seeing something expressed, and knowing instantly a great 'yes'. Yes, this is what I believe, this is how it is for me.

I think, on reflection, I was saying yes to three distinct yet referring principles. The first was a conviction of the goodness of the whole creation, not goodness in a moral sense, but ontologically, the goodness of being. All is good, not by virtue of its value to others, or by its resourcefulness or its efficiency, but simply in the fact of its being. It is a principle of intrinsic worth, the same principle that is celebrated in the first chapter of the book of Genesis.... '*and God saw that it was very good*', and that is displayed in the foundational creation stories of so many cultures and faiths.

And this particular expression of intrinsic worth spoke to me as someone brought up in and loving the city. This was not just a celebration of nature, but of the integrity of nature and culture. Here was someone who did not see any contradiction in loving a city skyline as much as the new moon, the flow of conversation as much as the hum of bees, who felt no necessity to place them in competition, opposition, or order of merit. All were good.

The second principle I was saying 'yes' to was the conviction, not only of the intrinsic worth of the creation, but of its interconnectedness. Part of its goodness lay not only in its existence but in its relatedness-or rather, that existence could not be separated from that relatedness. In Whitman's poem, the whole universe exists in a delicate yet complex web of relationship, in which the very language by which we recognise and name relatedness is itself a component. We, all of us, exist in relationship with the very air we breathe, we are part of it, without it we have no existence, just as we have no existence without the act of conception which brought us into being, which in its turn was contingent on billions of acts of conception of one kind or another.

At the beginning of the 21st century, we are much more aware of our interdependency with all other life forms-physicists, biologists, ecologists and scientists of every discipline have made sure that we can no longer plead ignorance-but Whitman, writing long before Einstein, in a scientific world that was still static and dualistic, spoke out of the intuitive wisdom of the artist and lover-which is, of course, the same wisdom that very small children have just as a result of using their senses, before it is socialised out of them. I remember my daughter, aged about two years, going to bed with a nightly ritual that went something like 'goodnight Mummy, goodnight Daddy, goodnight boys, goodnight teddy, goodnight sky, goodnight sea, goodnight sheep, goodnight birds, goodnight table, goodnight door'...and on and on until my stamina ran out at the prospect of naming the universe.

This interconnectedness, this integrity of creation, has been recognised always by poets and prophets and by the true religion that takes care, that reveres and sees the sacred. It is what Jesus was expressing in John's gospel.... *'I am the vine and you are the branches...a branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine..'* Or, more lately, in these words of prayer by George MacLeod, the Founder of the Iona Community....

*.....in You, all things consist and hang together:*

*The very atom is light energy,*

*The grass is vibrant,*

*The rocks pulsate.*

*All is in flux; turn but a stone and an angel moves.*

And the third principle I was saying 'yes' to in Whitman's poem was the conviction that nothing is more miraculous, more wonderful, more worthy of reverence, than the ordinary. Streets and trees, buses and birds, eating dinner and sleeping with someone loved-all such ordinary, accessible, habitual things, and yet all extraordinary. I knew that this articulated for me an incredible frustration that people should be so obsessed with searching for something else, while ignoring, devaluing and desecrating what they had right under their noses. This frustration, I confess, was considerably exacerbated by years in an academic study of theology, listening to interminable arguments (mostly among the students, it should be said)about the exact nature of the miracles of Jesus. It wasn't so much a disagreement with the answers, as an unhappy feeling that the questions entirely missed the point. What lack of imagination, insight, vision, blinded people to simply seeing what was there? Again, it was the poets who expressed it for me best.

George MacLeod, praying.... *'in all created things Thou art there. In every friend we have, the sunshine of Thy presence is shown forth. In every enemy that seems to cross*

*our path, Thou art there within the cloud to challenge us to love. Show to us the glory in the grey.'*

Or the American writer, Alice Walker:

*We alone can devalue gold  
by not caring  
if it falls or rises  
in the marketplace.  
Wherever there is gold  
there is a chain, you know,  
and if your chain  
is gold  
so much the worse  
for you.*

*Feathers, shells  
and sea-shaped stones  
are all as rare.*

*This could be our revolution:  
To love what is plentiful  
as much as  
what's scarce.*

Looking back over my life, I see that it has been guided and shaped by these three distinct yet referring principles: the conviction of intrinsic worth; the conviction of the relatedness of all things; the conviction of the wonder of the ordinary, the glory in the grey. I share my love of this poem and its meaning for me because it reiterates so much of what is at the heart of this passage from Ephesians. Jurgen Moltmann has identified a tendency among Christians to concentrate on the text they preach rather than the context in which the gospel must be proclaimed, so the poem is a little of my context. I come from Scotland, and from the Iona Community, from a tradition which holds to the sacramental character of the whole creation, which does not make distinctions between the sacred and the secular, but believes in the active self-communication of God in and through the things of this world. The 9<sup>th</sup> century Irish theologian, John Scotus Eriugena said: *'every visible and invisible creature can be called a theophany, an appearance of the divine.'* And the Christian Celts of Scotland used to refer to God's little book, the Bible, and God's great book, the creation, and read God in both.

And let us explore a little of the context of the letter to the Ephesians itself. There is some debate as to the **authorship** of this book, and whether it was actually written by Paul himself, or by a later writer; but there is no debate as to its **authority**. We cannot conclusively settle that debate, but we can think it likely that either Paul, or another, wrote this as a general letter to a number of churches at a time of turmoil and unease. But in that process, it became a kind of working-out and clarifying of Paul's theology, a private meditation for a public reception, and central to that is a reflection on the divine purpose at the heart of the Christian message. So it is first of all, and above all, a great hymn of **thanksgiving** for God's ultimate principle of unity and reconciliation. Out of a divided humanity, God is making a united one in Christ.

But not just a united humanity. This is a passage with a cosmic vision. That redemption and reconciliation which has been in the mind of God from the beginning is universal; it is for the whole creation. Almost two thousand years before Einstein, here is a recognition that there is no such thing as dead matter! Here is a great statement of a great Pauline theme- that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God, because that love and that promise extends to the whole creation.

*(Question: What does it mean for you to imagine that the love of God extends to the whole creation. I invite you to turn to the person sitting beside you and talk about that for a couple of minutes.)*

The tone and mode of this passage is one not only of thanksgiving but of **assurance**. Because there is nowhere that God's love has not extended - to the invisible as well as the visible world, to the things unknown as well as known, to the dreaming world as well as the waking one, as the Celtic poets had it - so we can be confident in the love of God, who does not love us conditionally, but has chosen us. In our adoption as God's children, we can be as secure as adoption in law made people in the past, for whom there was then no withholding of full belonging. All of this is a way to say -love is the element in which we dwell.

And these notes of thanksgiving and assurance are recapitulated and find their coda in **Christ**. This is a great love song to Christ. It is good to remember the solidarity of humankind with the whole creation. We are a species among species. We are dust, and return to dust. Again from George MacLeod's great prayer:

*With earthly eyes, we see ourselves, dust of the dust, earth of the earth; fit subjects at the last for the analyst's table. But with the eye of faith, we know ourselves all girt about of eternal stuff, our minds capable of divinity, our bodies groaning, waiting for the revealing, our souls redeemed, renewed....even now, our citizenship is in heaven.*

As Christ is lifted up, so are all things also lifted up more closely into the love of God. In that restoration of Christ into the life of God, the theological fault line is encompassed, and the whole natural order of creation becomes potentially full of the healing powers of life. The writer of Ephesians was writing from prison. He reminds me of these words of WH Auden.

*In the deserts of the heart, let the healing waters start,  
In the prison of his days, let the free man offer praise.*

The spirit of freedom and grace speak clearly in these words.

This 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's gospel is at the heart of the theology of George MacLeod. He wrote that in it is declared the apex of the relationship between the spiritual and the material. What he found in it is the belief that God is to be found, not outside the material but precisely in it. And that God came to redeem the whole person, soul and body. The gospel claims the key to all material issues is to be found in the mystery that Christ came in a body, and healed bodies and fed bodies, and that he died in a body and rose in a body, to save humanity, body and soul. This is a theology of the Incarnation, the doctrine that in Christ, God had entered the world's pain in love.

This conviction of the redemption of the whole person, what we might call a holistic theology, underpins all of George MacLeod's vocation. It led him to give up what many might consider a successful ministry in a wealthy parish in the West End of Edinburgh and move

to a slum parish in Govan, the dockland area of Glasgow during the height of the Depression of the 1930s. There, he found appalling poverty and squalor, high unemployment - and a profound sense among his parishioners that the church was 'no for the likes of us'; because they were poor, because they were not respectable, because they did not fit the pattern of churchgoers. He became increasingly aware, and disturbed, by his perception that the church had slipped into the old heresy of separating the spiritual and the material. The wealthy shipbuilder could say his prayers in church on Sunday-and then bully and oppress his workers from Monday through Saturday, and the church would say nothing.

So his holistic theology led him to conceive of an experiment whereby the unnoticed labour and the wasted potential of skilled workers-joiners, carpenters, masons and the like, would work together with young ministers who had just completed their academic training. The ministers would act as the unskilled labourers for the skilled artisans, would serve an apprenticeship in the Monday to Saturday world, if you like, and all of them together would share a common life of work and daily worship. The place he went to to carry out this experiment was the Inner Hebridean island of Iona, remote and beautiful cradle of Christianity in Scotland, on which the 6<sup>th</sup> century Irish monk, Columba, had established a Christian foundation and from which he had evangelised Scotland. The rebuilding would be of the ruined Benedictine monastic buildings of the later 12<sup>th</sup> century period. So the Iona Community was born out of the misery and poverty of an industrial city in the 1930s. And the rebuilding would be not just through wood and nails. It was to be a rebuilding of the common life, uniting work and worship, prayer and politics, the sacred and the secular. And so it was, and this sign of rebuilding captured the hearts and imaginations of many thousands of people over the last 65 years. The Community he founded still lives in the Abbey, which is still a centre of the common life, and the 250 members and 1500 associate members of the Community, dispersed throughout the world, follow a common rule of daily prayer, accounting to one another for their use of money and time, meeting together in community, and action for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

But it was not just in rebuilding that George's holistic theology expressed itself. It led him, who had been awarded the Military Cross in the trenches of the First World War, to become a convert to radical non-violence, and to sustained and costly opposition to militarization, nuclear weapons and the arms trade. It led him into a healing ministry, but one which was social as well as personal, for 'it is blasphemous to pray for Margaret with bronchitis, if we take no action about the damp housing which is causing her illness.' It led him to an increasing ecological concern, and he was the first, and to date, the only Life Peer to sit in the House of Lords to represent the Green Party.

But he was not just a socialist pacifist with an unusual work creation scheme. He was above all a man of Christ, of whom he had a truly cosmic understanding. He wrote in 1948...

*Take in text*

### **Living reconciliation**

But if we believe that in Christ, the whole creation is reconciled, what does this mean for us? If we are to consider ourselves as citizens of heaven, but heaven is also come down to earth, how do we express that citizenship in the here and now, which is the only place and time we have to express it.

If Christ is a centre of reconciliation to the world, then each Christian must also be a centre of reconciliation in his or her here and now. There is a profound irony and sadness in speaking of this at a time when the country of which I am a citizen has been so recently prosecuting a war. Implicit in the decision to prosecute a war is the tacit agreement that innocent people - babies, children, the old, the sick, the most vulnerable - will die. Their deaths will be an inevitable consequence of war. The end will be deemed to justify the means. In pursuit of that end, these innocent people will have been expendable. Many have died in the war on Iraq, many more have died in the aftermath of the war; from injury, landmines, cluster bombs, and more will die still.

But the absolute wrong of a policy that involves expendability does not depend on numbers, it is not a question of degree. Whatever the outcome, whatever the motive, the Christian gospel proclaims that the knowing sacrifice of innocent people is **always** a sin, always separates us from God, to whom every single person is precious, and in whose economy no one is expendable. In proclaiming the reconciling work of Christ, it is perhaps most important to say again, **'not in Christ's name are the innocent expendable.'**

*In Christ's body is named all the violence of the world, and in his memory is proclaimed our profoundest grief. God does not let us forget the wounds. The risen, wounded Jesus will not let us. In his memory is held for all eternity the broken and unremembered victims of tyranny and sin. The ones without names, the ones unnoticed, are made visible in the resurrection wounds, and are lifted up with Christ into the eternal love of God. And well that he will not let us forget. For in that memory of violence and complicity is also our hope. Our hope of repentance, of forgiveness, of reconciliation. We also need to hear the promise that goodness is stronger than evil, that love is stronger than hate, that life is stronger than death. It is a core belief of Christianity that sinners are not just everybody else except us.*

The rhetoric of war and the rantings of the tabloids serve their own purposes, divide people into innocent and guilty, into neighbours and strangers, into friends and enemies. But that rhetoric is a nonsense to the gospel. To practice reconciliation is to state, on the contrary, that God's justice and mercy extend to the innocent and the guilty alike, that God's community is not limited by national boundaries, and that the call of Jesus is to love our enemies, and pray for them, and do good to them. God's love and community transcend death and destruction, but we experience them only to the extent to which we are prepared to share them. This is the reconciliation which we have seen in Jesus.

I have been reading recently, to my considerable profit, a book by David Stevens, the Leader of the Corrymeela Community, *The Land of Unlikeness: Explorations into Reconciliation*. I was slightly taken aback to read this sentence in it: *'Christians are the visible fruits of God's reconciliation in Christ.'* It's not that I disagree with it - far from it, it's an impeccable theological statement - it's just that, put so straightforwardly like that, it has an immediate and personal demand, of the 'oh dear, this is me he's talking about.' Are we indeed visible fruits of reconciliation? David goes on to say: *'They (Christians) are called to make this reconciliation visible - visible in terms of a quality of relationships, visible in terms of openness and hospitality. It is a visibility which serves the same purpose as Christ's visibility, namely, to reveal God and his reconciling love. This is true holiness and is the ministry of reconciliation. Well, we all of us, wherever we are, have plenty of opportunities to make reconciliation visible.'*

And reconciliation is not just our vocation with regard to humankind, it is our vocation with regard to nature. We are also prosecuting a war on the earth. In Micah 6, the prophet calls the people as if to a court of law to listen to what God is saying, and this is what God the plaintiff says:

*Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.*

*Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; For the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.*

Here is another clear scriptural that to be creature in the covenant, to be citizens of heaven, it is not only to be required to be in right relationship with our own human kind, but with the whole creation. Justice is also eco-justice. And how then, will the mountains judge us? Will the enduring foundations of the earth find in our favour? In the last 25 years alone, the human species has destroyed one-third of its non-renewable resources. Our actions have consequences; the destruction of rainforests leads to global warming; the pollution of lakes destroys localised eco-systems, the earth resists soil erosion and the loss of bio-diversity with floodwater; the floods drown and bring diseases in their wake. How will the mountains judge us? I think we are beginning to hear the answer.

Across the world, in the material and spiritual struggle to find a sense of belonging, to grow deep roots, to be home-makers, it is the poorest who suffer most. It is also the poorest who are the most careful-who recycle rubbish, who don't drive cars or flit around the globe in energy-extravagant jet planes, who drain the least resources, who are resourceful, who go on affirming the intrinsic worth of life-because, given no extrinsic worth, they have to; who know their interdependence, who every day find the glory in the grey.

We may know our own design, have mapped it - but we still have to choose what it is for! In the face of human hubris, pride, which conceives itself as creator rather than created and which has come to threaten life on earth, can we who call ourselves citizens of heaven on earth affirm and practice a more self-disciplined ethos of reverence and respect for cultural, spiritual and bio-diversity alike, in which criteria for the good life are invested less in possession, sensation and speed and more in appreciation, substance and a sense of the mystery at the heart of life? Can we truly learn to practice voluntary self-limitation, in order to model the kind of economic, political and cultural exchanges and possibilities we might hope for ourselves and therefore expect from others; whether that is self-limitation in consumerism, in militarism and arms trading; in cultural and spiritual imperialism or in the use of whatever power we have.

To share in that reconciliation of all things in Christ, perhaps we need to find new possibilities of discerning the sacred nature of our planet, and of understanding our own place within its living environment. This is the good earth which God has given into our care as a sacrament of God's love and wisdom, a word and a gift in which the giver comes, and is present with us. So St Patrick believed in his great prayer of encompassing:

*I bind unto myself today  
the virtues of the starlit heaven,  
The glorious sun's life-giving ray,  
The whiteness of the moon at even,*

*The flashing of the lightning free,  
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,  
The stable earth, the deep salt sea  
Around the old eternal rocks.*

*I bind unto myself today  
the strong name of the Trinity,  
By invocation of the same,  
the Three in One and One in Three,  
Of whom all nature hath creation,  
eternal Father, Spirit, Word  
Praise to the Lord of our salvation,  
salvation is of Christ the Lord.*

**Kathy Galloway**

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