

**An invitation to explore our understanding of *Being in Communion...*
with God, with each other and with all of creation**

Morning Session

We are most fortunate to have a garden and like most people especially during the first lockdown last year when the weather was so glorious, it such a joy and gift to just be able to spend some time in it.

A few weeks ago, I caught a programme on the radio about how lives have been changed by the pandemic. I didn't get her name but the woman described how she lost her job early on the pandemic and she went from a busy, stressful job in the fashion industry which involved lots of travel to suddenly being faced with nothing to do. Since the weather was so nice she took up planting a few bulbs in her small garden and from there she took to spending more time in her garden, even taking up gardening classes on line. She spoke about how the reconnection with the earth, with nature in this tiny garden kept her sane, helped maintain her own well-being and brought her much healing of body, mind and spirit. It also gave her the courage to follow her heart and led to her moving from London to south Yorkshire where she was able to buy property with a plot of land that she hopes to develop as an organic smallholding.

It was a lovely story of hope and new life which we need to hear. Covid 19 has provided an opportunity for us all to review what is important in our lives. This return to nature highlighted in the story, is more than just escapism or mere sentimentality it is a place where I come home to myself, where I can find my true identity and where I also experience God.

How many of us have experienced the healing and transforming power of nature, and not just in lockdown?

When we look to Jesus, his teaching and stories are infused with examples from the natural world around him. In the first 2 weeks of Lent we had 2 images which are a recurrent theme in scripture, in the life of Jesus and in many religious traditions...the desert and the mountain top...

Jesus went alone into the Desert where Mark tells us, he was tempted by satan, he was with the wild animals and the angels ministered to him.

In the transfiguration, Jesus went up a high mountain, together with his close disciples, Peter, James and John, there he had the encounter with Moses and Elijah ... cloud formed and voice from heaven was heard .. This is my son, the beloved, listen to him. Mk 9 2-8

His experience in the desert and on the mountain, were transforming events. Through these encounters, Jesus came to a deeper understanding of his own identity as the beloved of the father and of his mission.

*As you look at the desert and the mountain, where are you drawn to?
What have been some desert and mountain top experiences in the past week, or the past few months?*

Often we experience God in and through nature. This experience of oneness with God and with nature or creation is very evident in the mystics. Francis of Assisi is probably one we are most familiar with in his beautiful *Canticle of the Creatures*, but there are many more who speak of that oneness with all.

In the next few slides I offer a few quotes from the mystics and I invite you to notice which of these speak to you today or stir something within you?

How does the wisdom of the Mystics speak to your own experience of relatedness with God and with creation?

Sadly today so many people are deprived of contact with nature, especially those living in large cities and overcrowded living conditions, and as always we know those who are made poor suffer the most deprivation.

As I said earlier, identifying with nature and the universe as a whole is not an optional extra but is intrinsic to understanding my identity, my true self. Being part of nature is my basic identity and needs to be more than just words. It needs to become an experience.

In his encyclical *Laudato Si* - Pope Francis calls every person on the planet to a new way of looking at and understanding our world.

We need an “ecological conversion” in which we see the intimate connection between God and all beings, and more readily listen to the “cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (LS - 49).

An ecological conversion not only for our own healing but for the healing of our planet. What we need to turn from is the illusion of separateness...that we are

separate and independent beings, towards a deeper sense of communion, of oneness. Oneness with each other, oneness with nature, with our earth and oneness with God.

Jesus had that deep sense of oneness, of communion with his father and with all of life.

The mystics also had that experience oneness.

While our experience of oneness with creation, may have much in common with the experience the mystics, it will also be different. This arises since our understanding of our planet earth, of the universe has changed profoundly even in the past 50 years. Thomas Berry would say that we are living in a moment of grace, in an awareness of earth's oneness that people before us never knew.

I will highlight a few aspects of this new awareness, this new understanding of the universe that shapes our worldview, our theology and all our relationships. This way of understanding and seeing is essential for the healing of our planet and hopefully will lead us to action in the service of all life.

Contemporary science is discovering a natural world that is full of surprises, dynamic, interconnected, self-organising, boundless, and open to the mystery of reality...this is both at the micro and at the macro level.

We've certainly been surprised by the impact that a tiny virus has had on the whole world.

But for this reflection, I will focus on the big picture... the Universe that we inhabit. Some of the things that we now know about the universe that reminds us that we are living in this new awareness, this moment of grace.....

The universe is unimaginably **old**: Our universe emerged from a tiny speck of light that exploded in an outpouring of matter and energy, 13.8 billion years ago. Everything that has unfolded in space and time was present in that initial flaring forth.

The Universe is mind-blowingly **large**: over one hundred billion galaxies each comprised of one hundred billion stars, and no one knows how many moons and planets. (We humans inhabit a small planet orbiting a medium sized star toward the edge of one spiral galaxy – Milky Way).

The Universe is amazingly **dynamic and interconnected**: out of the Big Bang, the stars; out of the stardust, the earth; out of the earth, single-celled living creatures; out of the evolutionary life and death of these creatures, greater complexity and diversity

unfolds and human beings eventually emerge as an integral part of the evolutionary process.

“The Physicist David Bohm describes this reality as “undivided wholeness in flowing movement.” The universe is like a mighty river in flow. From that single stream, smaller streams emerge. These are to be celebrated and cherished, each one absolutely unique, never to be repeated again – that blade of grass, that autumn leaf, your life, my life. Then we dissolve, merging back into the flow, our constituent parts to emerge again in new foundations further down the river. The universe wastes nothing in its endless unfolding.” (John Philip Newell – The Rebirthing of God)

From the very beginning, the pattern of death and life...of new life emerging from dying is embedded in the unfolding universe.

Our planet earth was formed 4.6 billion years ago when an aging, first generation star exploded, spewing out elements that eventually formed our solar system with the sun and its planets, including Earth.

Humans emerged much more recently as part of the evolutionary process. As Humans, we have self -awareness and the capacity to reflect on the universe and on the earth.

Human beings are the universe become conscious of itself.

I love looking at old family photos, there's so much interest nowadays in our family tree, discovering our roots, our ancestors and discovering who we are. We have a brown little suitcase at my mum's house full of old photos which when we gather together we love to look at and tell the stories that go with them - that's if we remember them. It a sad reality that when the generation before us have gone you very quickly lose the memory of some of the people and their stories.

I don't know about you, but when I see pictures of myself as a baby or a young child, I find it hard to believe that I'm looking at myself. Is it really me, what was I thinking and feeling at that time? There is a sense of awe and mystery about it. I'm sure that somewhere deep within us we also carry the memory of this and many other memories that are woven into the story of who we are.

Most of us love looking at the stars. When we look at the stars we are also connecting with our ancestors, reconnecting with the memories of our deep story and reminding ourselves that we are indeed made from the dust of the stars.

We are the universe becoming conscious of itself.

One of the treasures that the astronauts brought back from the moon was the images of the earth – this is probably the most familiar picture of earth that was taken in 1972 by Apollo the 17 crew on their way to the moon. There are some beautiful quotes from many astronauts who were privileged to this view of earth... (see slide)

The earth becomes aware of its own beauty, its own fragility through us.

How can this awareness of our oneness, of connectedness with all of life, serve not only our own well-being but the well-being of the planet.

I want to further explore three cosmic principles that are embedded and permeate every part of the universe from the very beginning. These 3 cosmic principles are:

Differentiation or diversity

Interiority or essence

Communion or community and interconnectedness

Each of these principles offer some learnings for us as we face the many challenges in our world today.

Differentiation – diversity: This diversity is present everywhere from the largest galaxies to the smallest sub- atomic particles. As Thomas Berry says- The emergence of the universe is neither determined nor random but is creative. This diversity is a revelation of God.

The universe cannot exist without diversity. The very differences that we avoid, that is causing much conflict and violence in our world are necessary for life to continue in a multitude of magnificent forms.

How do we celebrate and appreciate the diversity that is around us?

Interiority or essence : we often talk about the essence of who we are, the core of who we are. its that unique inner self which distinguishes each human being and which is present throughout the universe.

We began earlier with that lovely greeting Namaste – the divine within me, the essence within me acknowledges and bows to the divine within you.

That inner essence is in all things...not just within people.

Recognising that all is holy, everything created is holy. (See quote from Laudato Si Par 233)

Lack of respect for people and for our planet is the cause of much violence within our society and the degradation of our planet. As part of the ecological conversion that is needed today, we are called to deepen our own sense of the sacredness within all of life and to help others get in touch with the sacred essence of everything that exists.

How might we do this for ourselves and for others?

Communion- Community or Interconnectedness

This is intimately linked with the other two principles. The gravitational pull of love draws everyone and everything into relationship and communion.

“It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected. Time and space are not independent of one another, and not even atoms or subatomic particles can be considered in isolation.

Just as the different aspects of the planet – physical, chemical and biological – are interrelated, so too living species are part of a network which we will never fully explore and understand. A good part of our genetic code is shared by many living beings. It follows that the fragmentation of knowledge and the isolation of bits of information can actually become a form of ignorance, unless they are integrated into a broader vision of reality.”
Laudato Si -Par 138

These cosmic principles are a new way of understanding, seeing, and acting in a world that seems to be torn apart by a misunderstanding of the beauty of diversity, the holiness of essence, and the evolutionary pull of communion.

As we journey towards Easter – towards the death and resurrection of Jesus. What do we need to let go of? What do we need to die to, in order for new life to emerge?

Pope Francis says we need an “ecological conversion” in which we see the intimate connection between God and all beings, and more readily listen to the “cry of the earth and the cry of the poor”. (LS No. 49).

As Thomas Berry says that in reconnecting with the earth - ‘our challenge is to convert religion to the world rather than convert the world to religion.’

“What is needed is a conversion to the sacredness of matter and a spiritual communion with the earth. For this to happen we need to let go of the ways in which we have separated spirit from matter, heaven from earth, eternity from the universe.

Jesus says 'you must be born anew ' (John 3: 7).

As we see the signs of spring around us...

what is our dream of new life.... what is the dream for me? For our families and communities and for our planet?

What needs to be born anew within us, and in our world?