

## Christians facing the future that has already begun

A particular reflection on Thomas Berry CP (Brian Traynor CP)

Back in 1981 along with ten others from our Province, I attended a six week programme in Rome on Passionist history and Spirituality, Thomas Berry, a Passionist priest was talking there about the future, and pointing to the signs already present that were shaping it. 'Climate Change' was not a term being used then, but Tom was speaking about it, and much more. He spoke of rising sea levels that would threaten many iconic cities within fifty years. Thomas Berry co-authored with Brian Swimme, the brilliant book, 'The Universe Story'.

Berry was critical that Christianity lacked a suitable story that could replace an overemphasis in our theology and liturgy on redemption and atonement, with a focus on the unfolding revelation of the divine presence throughout the entire universe. Without such a story and a spiritual awareness of the inter-connectedness of all life, he claimed that Earth will continue to be plundered for its 'resources' and this risks the future of so many species (perhaps including the human!)

Berry pointed to the fact that the interpretation of the Biblical-Christian story was largely responsible for a culture within which a major disruption to all life forms has, was and will continue to occur. Genesis states, "*God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'*" (Genesis: 1:28). This command reflects an ancient agricultural trying to explain why they lived under difficult conditions. Urban people today can hardly appreciate the context for this and the language used.

*The Hebrew for "subdue"* suggests conquer, subjugate, violate, force, bring into bondage. *The Hebrew for "have dominion over"* suggests tread down, prevail against, and reign over. Environmentally concerned people today wish Genesis did not say that it! In fact the Genesis text taken in its context was liberating. It saw nature as God directed and good. Nature is not to be feared and can be used for human purposes. Those who have cleared and prepared new ground for a garden or for farming or who have ploughed rocky ground, know that 'subdue' is the most appropriate word to describe what is required.

The Genesis creation story says that after each stage of creating God saw what was created and it was 'good'. Genesis then goes on to explain that the original goodness of creation was corrupted by the sinfulness of humanity (Adam and Eve). Today we know that humans have spoiled our natural environment by ruthless and reckless exploitation and manipulation in quest of wealth, power and glory.

Genesis tells that the earth, created by God is good. Both the Biblical story and the Universe story tell how Earth reveals God to us and calls us to live in fellowship with reverence. When scripture focuses just on the human, this must be corrected. So too must fundamentalist Scripture notions that condemn nature to indiscriminate dominant human use.

Berry noted that concern for what is happening to the planet ranked low in church priorities, although there was a new awakening occurring. In a stark warning he suggested we might title a programme for training youth of the future, "Living Amid the Ruins".

Berry would be greatly encouraged by some of the words Pope Francis has spoken about the environment such as *"I don't know if it is all (man's fault) but the majority is, for the most part, it is man who continuously slaps down nature ... We have, in a sense, lorded it over nature, over Sister Earth, over Mother Earth ... I think man has gone too far ... Thank God that today there are voices that are speaking out about this"*. (January 2015)

Francis has also said "Evolution in nature is not at odds with the notion of creation because evolution presupposes the creation of beings that evolve. God gave creation full autonomy while also guaranteeing (his) constant presence in nature and in people's lives. So often we are driven by greed and by the arrogance of dominion, possession, manipulation and exploitation. This is our sin, exploiting the Earth. This is one of the greatest challenges of our time: to convert ourselves to a type of development that knows how to respect creation."

In the 1980's Berry noted that there was a strong developing ecological movement and he urged Christians to join this movement, rather than compete or separate themselves from it. He reckoned that the foundations of any Christian ecological awareness raising and action had to be built on a sense of the sacred, experienced by those who have dedicated themselves to protecting earth's life systems.

Berry noted that those who sense and promote the sacredness of the natural world are often accused of paganism or pantheism (that God is matter). He promoted panentheism (that God is in matter and within everything that lives). Pope Francis in June 2013, said *"We are losing the attitude of wonder, contemplation, listening to creation"*. This seems to be in contrast to the scientists. Brian Swimme can marvel that *"What was once molten rock, now sings opera."* *Albert Einstein said, "Every one who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the Universe -a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble"*

Berry pointed out that before the 16<sup>th</sup> century allowed for printed Bibles being more available, earlier Christian tradition recognised two sources of revelation, the divine in the natural world and the divine in the biblical world. However, the book of nature virtually disappeared. Berry said this had to be reclaimed and he challenged Christians to recognise that saving the planet was in fact part of saving the divine presence. In his teaching, Berry recognised that unlike indigenous traditions, an intense relationship with the earth does not come easily to Christians. He suggested this was partly because of the biblical presentation of God as personal creator and the one who established covenant relations with a chosen people.

Added to this was the emphasis given to redemption from a fallen or evil world, and the call to be detached from the things of this world. Christians were always hearing that they should long for another world – that the world here is our ‘vale of tears’. The Genesis view was that every earthly reality was given over to the care of humans and the focus of our attention was the spiritual soul of the human. Of course we now know that plant and animal life was here on earth for millions of years before humans emerged.

Since the natural world was seen to have no rights as such, our responsibility was directed only to God the creator and to ourselves. Christians did not feel responsible for the natural world. In this way, we became detached and disconnected from the world. Our primary attitude to the earth and its species became ‘stewardship’ and Genesis made it clear that we had dominion over (to care for) the earth and its creatures.

In contrast, Chief Seattle in 1854 declared, *“Our dead never forget this beautiful earth, for it is the mother of the red man. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters; the deer, the horse, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadows, the body heat of the pony, and man --- all belong to the same family”*.

Berry said that it is vital for Christians to recognise that the story of the universe, the story of earth, the story of life and the story of the human are one story. “To tell part of the story, we must tell the whole story” he said. Berry wanted us to capture a wonderful sense of the divine because we live in such a magnificent world. That world unfolds even more beautifully for us every year through the discovery of science and photography.

Our imaginations are filled by the beauty of so much variety of life. We are integral to this world which has unfolded over billions of years, not separate from it, nor superior to it. Ken Wilber wrote, *“We emerge from within it and are sustained within it. “Molecules awoke one morning to find that atoms were inside them, enfolded in their very being. And cells awoke one morning to find that molecules were actually inside them, as part of their very being. And you might awake one morning and find that nature is a part of you, literally internal to your being. You are not just a part of nature, nature is a part of you. And for just that reason, you treat nature as you would treat your lungs or your kidneys. A spontaneous environmental ethics surges forth from your heart, and you will never again look at a river, a leaf, a deer, a robin, in the same way.”*

Thomas Berry continually referred to the work to be done to defend the earth and the urgency of this work. He called for a united effort across the boundaries of nationality, culture and religion. He noted the landmark statement of the 1982 Charter of Nature, passed by the UN states, “Every form of life is unique, warranting respect regardless of its worth to humans, and to accord other organisms such recognition, humans must be guided by a moral code of action”. This, Berry claimed was the task for every human.

Various groups have responded to crises they have recognised, such as the depletion of the ozone layer, the loss of topsoil, the destruction of forests, the extinction of particular species, the pollution of rivers and oceans, and the dramatic changes in weather. But we lack a comprehensive story that binds these together. Berry said while we have well developed responses to suicide, homicide and genocide we are now confronted with biocide (the killing of life systems) and geocide (the killing of planet earth), and we have no ethical or moral principles to respond to this.

We are eliminating life forms such as rainforests, that took millions of years to bring into existence. While they stand on the land of particular countries, their loss affects everyone on the planet. He noted that species are disappearing at a rate reckoned to be somewhere between 1,000 and 10,000 per year and declared that we are in the midst of a mass extinction, the first one that has been caused by humans. Scientists in 2015 claim the species loss is not 17,000 per year. Some species of gorillas, tigers and elephants face imminent extinction.

Berry pointed out that every species today lives within the habitat shaped by humans and our lifestyle. He warned that the extinction of one species means its eternal disappearance from the universe. For this reason, it is an eschatological event. He noted that a doctrine of stewardship is inadequate in dealing with this. What is needed is a new religious sensitivity within all religious traditions, built on an awareness that every life form is inter-connected and what we do to the earth, we do to ourselves. "The universe", he said, "is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects". He urged us to recognise that there is one single sacred community in which humans share, and the future can exist only if humans understand how to commune with the natural world rather than exploit it.

To do this, Berry said we need a new cosmology that recognizes the diversity that has enabled all that has come into being, electrons and protons, stars and galaxies, multicellular organisms, the immense variety of flora and fauna, as well as the rich diversity of humans. Each form in the universe is a unique manifestation of existence and exists in communion with every other life form. One estimate is that an incredible thirty billion different species have developed in earth's history.

Berry suggested that "history is governed by those overarching movements that give shape and meaning to life by relating the human venture to the larger destinies of the universe. Creating such a moment might be called 'the Great Work of a people'. He suggested that responding to the destruction of the planet and awakening to the call of the sacred is the great work of our times. He wanted children to learn not just to read books but to read the great book of the world. The language they must learn, he said, is the language of living relationships that extend throughout the universe. Learning to garden and grow their own food would be practical ways of connecting with the reality of life and how it grows, develops, sustains and is sustained.

Paul of the Cross, founder of the Passionists, advised *“Give yourself the rest you need. When you are walking alone, listen to the sermon preached to you by the flowers, the trees, the shrubs, the sky, the sun and whole world. Notice how they preach to you a sermon of love, of praise of God, and how they invite you to proclaim the greatness of the One who has given them being”*

In considering the future, Berry called for us to abandon the extractive economy mentality, developed in the nineteenth century. Such an economy is terminal. It is non-renewable, unlike an organic economy.

In her video clip, ‘The Story of Stuff’, Annie Leonard quotes that in 1955 retail analyst Victor Le Bow said, “Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and selling of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction in consumption. We need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever accelerating rate.” How tragic this is for us.

The extractive economic mentality was evident in last year’s ‘carbon tax’ debate in Australia. The taxing of carbon was identified as bad for the economy. That there might not be an atmosphere capable of sustaining life caused by our inaction is considered too long a view for economists! At the same time, we might look back in the future (already begun), and identify the abandonment of carbon trading, emission schemes or taxes as a spur to focus on the macro level of our reality. In 1991 in a E.F Schumacher lecture, Berry pointed out that the ‘minor scale’ efforts such as recycling and reducing our use of energy sometimes work against what we have to do, because we don’t take action to cease plundering the Earth and its basic resources, instead, we allow the industrial life pattern to continue.

He claimed that the modern global economy lacked adequate controls by any government. Action is taken without restraint, underdeveloped nations are exploited and their resources seriously diminished. Corporations have had the primary objective of exploiting the planet for economic gain. We live in Berry’s future world; a technological world interested in today rather than tomorrow. Berry warned that the Earth could live without humans, but humans cannot live without Earth. To have any future not only for ourselves, but for other life forms, we have to wake up and begin reading the great book of nature that surrounds us.

An anthropocentric view of the world that sees everything as a resource for the human is a primary reason for the mass extinction of natural species everywhere. How easily many people destroy the life of an insect because it is inconvenient for them. In doing this we often reflect the attitude that we are lords of life. Berry said there must be a new understanding and new principles at the political, economic, intellectual, and religious level.

In 1981 Berry went to a gathering of fifteen hundred teachers in New York. He had been invited to speak on religion in the modern world. Only a handful of teachers turned up and only two had any real interest in his message!

Berry noted that for the first time, almost universally now, children are learning a common story of the universe, but often it is told simply as scientific fact without any sense of the mystique that even scientists themselves today have come to appreciate. He says we must encourage children to appreciate the universe as the primary revelation of the divine.

The challenge is to recapture what primitive people experienced and knew because of their close connection with the land, the environment, the animals, plants and vegetation. In 1854 Chief Seattle wrote, *“The earth is not the white man’s brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on. I am a savage and do not understand any other way. I have seen a thousand rotting buffaloes on the prairie, left by the white man who shot them from a passing train. I am a savage we only kill the buffalo to stay alive. How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? One thing we know which the white man may one day discover, is that our God is the same God as theirs. The earth is precious to Him, and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator.”*

We need the language to tell ‘the story’ in a new way. It is a sacred story. Vatican observer, Robert Wickens suggested in February 2015, that “Finding the right words” for our beliefs, our teachings, our disciplines -- is one of the great tasks the church's pastors and its people must discover.” Thomas Berry devoted his life to this task.

His life ended in 2009 at age 94. He was a prophet, not appreciated by all of his Passionist brothers, including those of us who heard him speak in 1981. However, some did learn and have committed their lives to enhancing his vision and sharing his views and warnings about the future.

Whenever we hear warnings today of major cities possibly sinking below rising sea levels, we recall Berry saying exactly that in 1981, and wondering whether he would be surprised at the resistance to his warnings then and now.

A Passionist college, John O’Brien said about him, “Thomas Berry was convinced that the major concern of contemporary society is the future of the planet and the human role in that future. He was equally convinced that the scientific insights of this century have provided us with a story of the cosmos and the planet earth that can defeat the alienation from the earth that is so ruinously expressed in our industrial economies”.

Dairmuid O’Murchi MSC has said, “We need an integrated spirituality and not merely a revamped understanding of Christianity (or any other religion). That integration is based on a cooperative endeavour, in which everything, and everybody has its rightful place, but for mutual enhancement, so that together we can support forward movement of everything in creation under the creative plan of God”. For those of us touched to whatever degree by Thomas Berry’s vision, there are some paths he showed for how we can move from where we are to the future that beckons; a future already begun. Let us join that great work.

## References

The Ecozoic Era E.F. Schumacher Society Lectures, October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1991.

Thomas Berry

The Challenge of our Times Assisi, June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1997. Thomas Berry

Our Children: Their Future August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1992. Thomas Berry

The Christian Future Undated (Late 1980's) Thomas Berry

'The Story of Stuff' Annie Leonard

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GorqroigqM>

## **12 Principles: Understanding the Universe and the Role of the Human in the Universe Process.....Thomas Berry CP**

1. The universe, the solar system, and the planet Earth, in themselves and in their evolutionary emergence, constitute for the human community the primary revelation of that ultimate mystery whence all things emerge into being.
2. The universe is a unity, an interacting and genetically-related community of beings bound together in an inseparable relationship in space and time. The unity of planet Earth is especially clear: each being of the planet is profoundly implicated in the existence and functioning of every other being.
3. The capacity for ordered self-development, for self-expression, and for intimate presence to other modes of being must be considered as a pervasive psychic dimension of the universe from the beginning.
4. The three basic laws of the universe at all levels of reality are differentiation (everything in creation has a distinctive uniqueness), subjectivity, and communion. These laws identify the reality, the values, and the directions in which the universe is proceeding.
5. The universe has a violent as well as a harmonious aspect, but it is consistently creative in the larger arc of its development.
6. The Earth, within the solar system, is a self-emergent, self-propagating, self-nourishing, self-educating, self-governing, self-healing, self-fulfilling community. All particular life-systems must integrate their being and their functioning within this larger complex of mutually dependent Earth systems.
7. The human emerges within the life systems of Earth as that being in whom the universe reflects on and celebrates itself in a special mode of conscious self-awareness. The human is genetically coded toward further cultural coding, by which specifically human qualities find expression in a remarkable diversity in the various regions of the Earth.

8. Domestication: transition to village life and greater control over the forces of nature took place in the Neolithic period, 12,000 years ago; beginnings of agriculture, domestication of animals, weaving, pottery and new stone implements.
9. The classical civilizations: progressive alienation of the human from the natural world; the rise of cities, elaborate religious expression in ritual and architecture, development of specialized social functions, increase in centralized government, the invention of writing and related technologies.
10. The scientific-technological-industrial phase: the violent plundering of the Earth takes place, beginning in Europe and North America. The functioning of Earth is profoundly altered in its chemical balance, its biological systems, and its geological structures. The atmosphere and water are extensively polluted, the soil eroded, and toxic waste accumulates. The mystique of the Earth vanishes from human consciousness.
11. The ecological age: a new intimacy is sought with the integral functioning of the natural world; destructive anthropocentrism is replaced with eco-centrism; transition to the primacy of the integral Earth community.
12. The newly developing ecological community needs a mystique of exaltation and finds it in the renewal of the great cosmic liturgy, which celebrates the new story of the universe and its emergence through evolutionary processes.