



TURN AGAIN

Joel 2:12-18

- 12 Yet even now, says our God,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
- 13 rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to your God,
who is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.
- 14 Who knows whether God will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for your God?
- 15 Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
gather the people.
- 16 Sanctify the congregation;
assemble the aged;
gather the children,
even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her canopy.
- 17 Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of God, weep.
Let them say, "Spare your people, O God,
and do not make your heritage a mockery,
a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
'Where is their God?'"
- 18 Then God became jealous for this land,
and had pity on this people.

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT offers an ecological reading of the Ash Wednesday readings Joel 2:12-18 and Matthew 6:1-6; 16-18.

Ash Wednesday is at the end of February and begins the season of Lent. The readings for this day are characterised by a call to conversion and this theme weaves through the six weeks of Lent. I have chosen the first reading Joel 2:12-18 and the Gospel Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 to begin our year of ecological readings of lectionary texts.

Reading biblical texts ecologically is an approach that is informed by the ecological consciousness emerging among many people in our world. It is about paying attention to the whole Earth community – the human characters and

their relationships as well as the other-than-human, such as the land and animals, and to the presence or absence of right relations among these. It is a "critical" approach like other ethical approaches to reading the Scriptures such as feminist and postcolonial interpretations. The significant difference characterising an ecological approach is that the other-than-human relationships are often not explicit in the text – they're encoded.

The first reading for Ash Wednesday is an extract from the prophet Joel (2:12-18). We're not exactly sure of the historical time when Joel was active as a prophet. However, his prophetic challenge is as relevant for us as it was for the people during his ministry. The prophet's call is to "return", to "come back" – come back to a way of living in right relationships within the human community and the ecological community. This re-turn is not to be an external (and perhaps exaggerated) show of repentance but rather a breaking of our heart. We are experiencing this heart breaking as the bush fires have ravaged Australia over the past months destroying all in their pathway and leaving a scorched earth. They've devastated wildlife, destroyed human and animal homes and caused suffering and trauma.

We feel the heartbreak around the world as arable land becomes a desert – human-induced climate change is taking its toll. Our hearts break for the many animal species whose

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habitats and survival are threatened by humanity's heavy footprint on planet Earth. We can join those who hear the prophetic voice echoing today – "turn back; return!"

The voice of God in the text reiterates the call: "Let your hearts be broken not your garments torn; turn to your God again." God's cry can reach us from every local, national and international ecological disaster.

Then Joel asks a question that challenges the belief that our behaviour doesn't matter: "Who knows if God will not turn again and repent and leave a blessing in passing?" Just as this was a question for Israel, it is a question for us today as we face the ecological challenges of the world.

In response to this penetrating question the prophet gathers the people to cry out to God. And, likewise, we can ask as a community: "Is it possible to reverse the profound damage the human community is wreaking on the planet? What does this challenge mean in relation to our image of divinity and divine creativity?"

The prophet seems to point toward an answer in the final verses: "Then our God, jealous on behalf of this land took pity on God's people." We hear that it is God's relationship with the land which informs God's mercy for the people.

Lenten Practices

The gospel extract, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18, comes from the longer story of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. Jesus addresses the practices of giving alms, praying and fasting that come under the evangelist's description of "doing righteousness" or "right living/living rightly". We are also familiar with these themes but this Lent we can explore them in terms of ecological challenges.

Almsgiving is the first practice mentioned. We probably think of what the Gospel calls "giving alms" in terms of fundraising, sponsoring or giving donations today. And we also understand it in terms of a just distribution of resources. This calls for a communal process in which we all participate in sharing resources more inclusively and justly.

Prayer is the second practice. Jesus was critical of those making prayer an ostentatious performance to look good in other's eyes. He encouraged the disciples to pray silently and in a hidden way. We can take this to heart and explore new ways to pray authentically, prayer that is appropriate to our time and place and which is both personal and communal.


Fasting is the third practice. Christians today probably don't think about fasting as much as giving alms and praying. We think of fasting primarily as abstaining from food and probably don't think about why it is a Christian practice. We can extend our understanding of fasting by exploring a right relationship to food. This could include eating locally grown food and other practices that relieve our damaging impact on Earth. We could fast by limiting our recreational activities and giving some personal time to those in need within the human and Earth communities. During this Lenten season we could consider how we understand "fasting" and begin to practice it more radically. 

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Matt 6:1-6, 16-18

"Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

5 "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you . . .

Matt. 6:16 "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."



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