

## ***Touch the earth lightly***

Today's extra reading is from an essay entitled *Our way into the future* by Thomas Berry.

*We wish to outline the conditions for entering a future that will lead to the larger fulfilment for which the entire planet, as well as ourselves, seems to be destined. The first condition for achieving this objective is to realise that the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects . . .*

(Thomas Berry describes how in the seventeenth century people began to think of humans as separate from the rest of the natural world.)

*The thousandfold voices of the natural world became inaudible to many humans. . . . The forests were no longer the abode of an infinite number of spirit presences but were simply so many board-feet of timber to be "harvested" as objects used for human benefit. Animals were no longer the companions of humans within the single community of existence. They were denied not only their inherent dignity but even their right to habitat.*

*As we recover our awareness of the universe as a communion of subjects . . . an enlargement of soul takes place. Dawn and sunset are once again transforming experiences, as are the sights, sounds, scents, tastes and feel of the natural world about us – the surging sea, the sound of the wind, the brooding forests. All this could be continued in a never-ending list of experiences that have been lost to large segments of the human community in recent centuries – not because [these things] do not surround us constantly, but because we become locked into ourselves . . . It is no wonder that humans have devastated the planet so extensively. It was only a collection of objects to be used.*

Round about 1990 I was buying a new car and I asked the salesman whether it could run on unleaded petrol. He said that he didn't know but if I was concerned about the environment he could find out.

"If I was concerned about the environment"! That, I hope, is not something that could be said today. What we are "concerned about" is not some mysterious external thing

called “the environment”; it is the health of the earth because the earth is our home, and our health and well-being are inescapably tied into the health and well-being of the earth – the whole earth.

Let’s get the science out of the way as briefly as we can because there is a great deal of confusion about it. Someone complained to me, just about the time that I was buying that car, that he didn’t see why he should have to use unleaded petrol because of its effect on something he didn’t understand called the ozone layer; but lead in petrol had nothing to do with the ozone layer. The exhaust gases from petrol with lead in it cause brain damage, especially in children. I wanted to use unleaded petrol, as we all must now by law, not because of some eccentric intellectual “concern for the environment” but because I didn’t want to cause brain damage in children, whose school playgrounds are often found beside busy roads. The ozone layer, which protects us from the harmful rays of the sun, was being damaged by CFC gases, used in aerosols and refrigeration. Both of these problems have been tackled and, if not completely solved, hugely reduced.

The whole world is now being urged to be concerned about global warming, which is caused by the release of too much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and which may raise sea levels and change living conditions in a dangerous way. We release carbon dioxide into the atmosphere when, among other things, we burn wood, coal and oil which, of course, we have been doing to an increasing extent for the past two or three hundred years. Excess carbon dioxide can be absorbed by the world’s great forests, but we have been reducing them at an alarming rate.

Let’s be clear about one thing: there is no danger that we will destroy the earth. Nothing short of some huge cosmic disaster completely beyond our control could do that. There is a real danger, however, that the earth may destroy us, or at least most of us. Living as we now live we are damaging the earth. If we continue on our present path it may become much less hospitable to us. In a thousand years time the earth will still be here; unless we change our ways there may be few, if any, humans living on it.

Our concern needs to be, not just for specific practical problems like lead in petrol, CFCs, or even global warming, but for the general attitude of human beings towards the rest of the natural world of which we are a part. The earth is not, as Thomas Berry reminds us, a collection of objects to be used for our benefit. He calls it “a communion of subjects”; that is, a fellowship of all living things who need each other in order to enjoy the fullness of life intended for them by their Creator.

As I said, we have taken lead out our petrol and CFCs out of our aerosols. The minority of scientists who deny that global warming is happening, or say that it has nothing to do with human activity may be right, though I don't think they are; and if they are wrong, we may well find ways to fuel our cars and generate our electricity without releasing carbon dioxide. None of that will get to the root of the problem. At the merely practical level, if we develop cars which produce no pollution, there will still be too many cars, needing more and more roads for them to drive on, causing more and more congestion in towns and cities. If everybody has a car we may all shop nowhere else but out-of-town supermarkets and local high streets will become even more run down than they already are. If we can generate clean electricity, we will be ever more likely to ignore what lies outside our own front door, our own car, and the supermarket where we shop. If air travel uses clean fuel and remains cheap, more and more of us will rush off to the ends of the earth, ruining the way of life of the countries we visit.

All of which is an exaggeration. It will never quite happen. All the same, that is the way we seem to be going, the way many of us seem to want to go; and what we need to avoid it is not better science or new technology. What is needed is a change of attitude; above all, a change of heart.

We need to realise that, as many aboriginal traditions around the world have always said, the earth does not belong to us: we belong to the earth. The earth is not merely a background to our lives. We need to think first of the earth and then of our place within it.

In fact we are just figures in a landscape – no more and no less important than the hills and fields and rivers, the trees

and flowers, the non-human animals that are also to be seen in the landscape. These other elements are not just there for our use: they have their own reality, their own integrity, their own right to exist.

This takes us much deeper into the crisis of our times than personal fears for our future if, for example, the climate changes more than we can handle. It confronts us with questions about who we think we are. It asks of us by what right we claim to control the rest of creation.

It also reminds us that what I have just called “the crisis of our times” has its roots far, far back in time. The rate at which we are harming the planet has increased hugely in the past three hundred years and the speed of change keeps on increasing; but from the time our distant ancestors began clearing the forests and ploughing up the soil to grow crops we have been increasingly imposing our needs and desires over against the rest of Creation. Before that time, our most distant ancestors lived like the rest of the animals: hunting for game and gathering wild fruits – and before that, there were millions of years when the earth existed, when life existed and developed, without there being any humans at all. So even the modern Christian idea that we are stewards of the earth, called to care for it, is as arrogant in its own way as the idea that we can use it as we please. There is no way that we can improve on the genius of nature, which survived and prospered without us for far longer than we have existed.

Those long millennia without us were the time when, as Thomas Berry describes it, *the systems of Earth brought forth their most entrancing beauty. This was the period of flowers in their unnumbered variety and in all their gorgeous colours and fantastic shapes. A wildly creative period of divine fantasy and extravagant play. This was the period of music, of wind through the trees, the call of the mockingbird, the song of whales in the sea; this period saw the flight of the osprey, the colourful patterns on the wings of the butterfly, the fireflies in the evening.*

He continues, *Then came our own ancestors, some sixty thousand years ago, with developed speech, with symbolic language, with skills in toolmaking, with extended family communities and the capacity for song and dance and*

*elaborate ritual within the sacred community of the entire natural world.*

“Within the sacred community of the entire natural world” – it was when we began to lose that basic understanding that we really began to get things wrong. We started to forget that everything is intimately connected with everything else. We started to think that we humans were separate from the rest of Creation, even that we were superior to the rest of nature.

*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth . . . and God saw all that he had made; and it was very good.* All of it was very good, not just some of it. All life springs from the original blessing of the Creator, not just some of it. Jesus the Christ came to teach compassion for all created things, not just for some of them; and compassion does not mean pity and concern offered from the heights of some imagined superiority; it means fellow-feeling, sharing, living in the sacred community of earth.

When we are aware, daily and almost without thinking about it, that we are part of the sacred community of earth, then we will treat the rest of Creation lightly, not out of some burdensome sense of duty, but because we delight in our place in the universe from which we have emerged and to which, when we die, we shall return. Our pleasure and delight in Creation will carry us through where the lectures of moralists and prophets of doom cannot. In our pleasure and delight in Creation we shall give glory to God the Creator.