

REFLECTION – Climate Summit – COP21 service

“I go down to the shore in the morning and depending on the hour the waves are rolling in or moving out, and I say, oh, I am miserable, what shall – what should I do? And the sea says in its lovely voice: Excuse me, I have work to do” (Mary Oliver)

We are gathered here in hope from different faith traditions, age ranges and walks of life all intent on the wellbeing and care of our Common Home, we too have work to do! We are at a critical time in our history as we face up to the signs of the times and our current reality. In this time of planetary crisis we are approaching the edge, that space of poise and perspective on the ocean of possibilities amid the devastation and seeming hopelessness of our ill-informed choices and often compulsive lifestyles.

That edge can be the precipice of doom, the point of no return in our headlong stampede for more and more, or it can be the catalyst to wonder and awe, the holy ground of real presence opening us to the mystery of divine bountifulness and love flaring forth in the universe, our common home. The choice is ours. At this moment we stand together with billions of our human companions and countless billions of our kin in the wider community of life embracing the dream of present and future generations as we look with hope – hope tinged with fear- towards the global climate summit in Paris early next week.

Gathered here, I’m reminded of Jesus shortly before his death, his coming to that edge which did not lead to eventual doom but to new life. He is acutely aware of his disciples and wants to prepare them for the realities ahead. I’m always intrigued that by what he says to

them as recorded in John 16:12-13 – “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit comes, the Spirit will guide you into all the truth.”

What are some of the things we cannot bear now or are we perhaps ignoring the Spirit of enlightenment alive in our midst? Let's reflect for a few moments on what we know in our hearts but are perhaps puzzled and often paralysed by. The ardent hope is that in so doing our paralysis may be transformed into action for the wellbeing of all life.

We live in an evolving and expanding universe stretching back almost 14 billion years. The mystery of this unfolding, constantly flaring forth in newness as it weaves patterns of equilibrium and turbulence – the splendid array of life, energy and creativity - is mind-boggling. We, humans, are fairly recent arrivals with a long and profound wisdom- rootedness to guide us. We are one species among many in the magnificent web of life sharing the same atoms, chemicals and minerals. We are all unique but not separate in the community of life each a manifestation of divine beauty and creativity. In the human the universe becomes self-consciously aware; this is both a privilege and a responsibility. Core to this responsibility must be what unites us rather than what separates us.

Considering that our human ancestors of a couple of hundred years ago believed that the entire universe was the Milky Way galaxy, we are making great advances with our telescopes and precision technologies. This is wonderful and needs to be continued. However, a note of humility, with all our advances we can observe only five per cent of our universe, so-called ordinary matter. The nature of the remaining ninety-five per cent, made up mostly of dark energy and some five per cent dark matter, eludes us. We, all beings, are a

microcosm of this reality, each of us is an inexhaustible mystery with profound depth of richness within, we will never know it totally. What a wonderful time to be alive and searching for meaning.

We are realising more and more that all life is interconnected and interdependent – a fact emphasised again and again by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* – ‘God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement.’

(89) This calls for a change of worldview or mindset; a new story of evolutionary continuity in our universe and of planet earth as a living, breathing organism. Seeing the earth as alive and evolving – our common home- jolts us into changes of attitude, perceptions, values and lifestyle as we try to live more responsibly in a planet of abundant yet finite resources. Our current Western economic model based on unlimited consumption of limited resources is madness. This is especially true when wedded especially to profit at any cost and vested interests. How can we say that we are creating a better future when there is such ecological deterioration and human devastation?

We now know beyond doubt that climate change is the single biggest ecological and humanitarian crisis of our time and that we are implicated in this as never before. We know that Earth is warming dangerously; we need to keep it below 2 c. degrees pre-industrial levels. Alarmingly, the IPCC has confirmed and this has been endorsed by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* together with the leaders of other faiths and political leaders worldwide, that certain human activities e.g. emissions from fossil fuels, deforestation, transport and many farming practices are contributing to the recent acceleration of global warming and climate change. The consequences of climate change literally reverberate throughout the

planet and beyond, putting enormous stress on our major ecosystems which in turn is devastating the earth and rendering millions of people and species poor, isolated and homeless or habitat-less. The UN Millennium Ecosystems Assessment Report, published in 2005, tells us that of the 24 major life systems e.g. forests, wetlands, coral reefs, 16 are pushed beyond sustainable limits; that is over sixty per cent. The new UN Sustainable Development Goals, signed off by world leaders in New York in September 2015 and shaped by the 3 pillars of sustainability – environmental, social and economic – are a global effort to preserve and enhance what is possible before it is too late. **The 19th century Cree Indian wisdom is haunting: Only when the last tree has died and the last river has been poisoned and the last fish has been caught will we realise that we cannot eat money”**

With the living systems of our planet so much at risk particularly from climate change, over-extraction of coal, oil, gas, alarming loss of biodiversity, widespread pollution, waste and toxic, prolonged warfare, an ecological conversion, both personal and communal is urgently needed. Naomi Klein, author of “This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus the Climate” is forthright: **“The fossil fuel industry is locking us into a future we can’t survive”**

We recall when the global financial crash occurred in 2007/8 that the major currencies rallied to bolster the failing economy. What if even one of the living systems of the common home were to fail? What if we could no longer breathe pure air, drink clean water or enjoy the nourishment of fertile soil and sunshine? Who or what could come to the rescue? What can we do at this critical time of mass destruction of our common home and global displacement of millions of people and species? Cosmologist Thomas Berry reminds us that we cannot have well people on a sick planet; if the planet is

unhealthy we will be unhealthy. This unhealthy state is causing mass migrations as people and other species move in search of food, water and shelter. The words of Carl Jung also spring to mind: “Who looks outside, dreams, who looks inside, awakes.” If there was ever a time when we need a creative blend of dreaming and awaking that time is surely now! I believe we must embrace the inner and outer journey as one knowing that our efforts at addressing climate change will be more effective if we are trying to attend to what is polluted, over-heating or out of control in our own lives. You can't change what's going on around you until you start changing what's going on within you. The outer work can never be great if the inner work is small, and the outer work can never be small if the inner work is great (Meister Eckhart)

We are acutely aware of global terrorism, violence and mass loss of life today whether in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Paris, Mali or elsewhere and we are left with much to ponder. As we attempt to hold in reverence the juxtaposition of the Paris tragedy of November 13th and the upcoming Climate Summit in Paris there is that haunting sense of eerie resonance with indigenous wisdom which tells us that we are not separate from the earth, what we do to the earth we do to ourselves. All is connected, we belong together; we are one. The symbolism is striking, but will we learn?

The hope is that we can come home to our deepest selves, our essence, and from that place of integrity, passion and perspective listen anew to the cry of the earth and the plight of the poor among us and widen our circle of compassion to embrace all beings in the community of life. Let us awaken to our own innate goodness and that of all in the total community of life, while aware of our limitations and weaknesses. May we boldly step up to the collective challenge created by having lost our way and settled for the ultra-

comfortable over the common good as together we endeavour to create a better world where all will feel at home in our common home. The absolute urgency of this is highlighted by our President, Michael D. Higgins as follows:

“Ours may be the final generation with the opportunity to effectively respond to the urgent, uncontested effects of climate change.”

Hope springs eternal, we can turn things around if the will is there and huge grassroots efforts aided by social media are doing just that while there is a persistent lack of political will and procrastination as we know from our own country. Ireland, still hoping for concessions because of our agricultural status, goes to Paris without emissions targets! An example from climatologist John Sweeney is startling: the total greenhouse gas emissions for Ireland (pop 4.5 million) is more than the total for the 400 million poorest people on the planet.

However, there are encouraging signs globally offering opportunities for all of us to play our part: e.g “Keep it in the Ground” movement to divest from fossil fuels, the Church of England is taking a lead in this, and the anti-fracking movement which is gathering momentum. The onus is on all of us to contribute personally, as family, community, parish, society by educating ourselves and our children to live more sustainably. It is encouraging to learn of the cessation of the Alberta tar-sands Keystone XL pipeline project in Canada-USA; USA and China, the world’s biggest polluters, setting targets to reduce emissions and the, as yet, aspirational declaration of the G8 to move beyond fossil fuels forever by 2050.

I would like to acknowledge the influential role of groups locally and globally, groups represented here and countless others too numerous to mention. We are beginning to wake up to the realisation that we are not only polluting our planet but seriously

interfering with its geology and geo-physical structures. The magnificent complexity of our evolving planet over 4.5 billion years is being rapidly destroyed and we are seriously implicated in this process. The knock-on effects are devastating for planet and people, particularly those least responsible for the destruction as Mary Robinson and others continue to remind us.

We do indeed have work to do. Pope Francis cautions against leaving “a world looking more and more like an immense pile of filth” while reminding us that “we can be silent witnesses to grave injustices” by our current inaction and expecting future generations to clean up after us. As we countdown to COP21 in Paris in a few days and look beyond that to collective action, the words of American poet and writer, Maya Angelou come to mind:

“Hope and Fear cannot occupy the same space. Invite one to stay”.

The choice is ours, can we dare to hope? May we be guided by the Spirit, ever present, and encouraged by the hopes and dreams of the billions of people and all beings with whom we share life’s delicate balance.

Nellie Mc Laughlin RSM

National Ecumenical Prayer Service (UN Climate Summit Paris 2015)

Clarendon Street Church, Dublin 25th November 2015.

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