

Transformed Matter: Deep Incarnation

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus heals a deaf man in a way we may find surprising.

He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.

This is a Jesus who inhabits our very real material world. This is not an other-worldly, esoteric spiritual figure. He heals a man of deafness by sticking his fingers in his ears. Should we be slightly embarrassed by this? I don't think so, in fact there is a profound spiritual lesson at work here and it's connected to our environmental crisis. The lesson is about material reality and about the very nature of all that has been made by God.

What has been made by God? Sometimes we talk about 'the natural world' as though it were separate from our human made reality – but the natural world is *the only* world that we inhabit. That's why as Christians, we should try not to talk about nature but about Creation – because that describes our understanding that there is a Creator and a creation, of which we as humans are one element or part. Use of the word nature objectifies it, making it into an other and separates it from us. But it's hard not to use the word, it's so embedded in our culture and how we think about the world. And the objectification and othering of nature can lead to two outcomes: 1) its romantic idealization 2) its commodification. We go into nature for a day out and expect it to be beautiful and perfect just for us; or we take and extract everything that we want from nature for our own use, and don't think about it as something of integral value and worth.

A few months ago, I visited the Ed Burtynsky exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery called Extraction/Abstraction. Over a long career Ed has taken large scale photographs from height of a variety of landscapes that have been altered forever by mining, farming and human impact. He photographs large scale human extraction of materials and turns them into abstract photographs. He also charts the impact of climate change on coral reefs, and of western rubbish which is dumped in poorer countries. The photographs tell a story of poverty and wealth, and also the story of how humans have used technology and cheap human labour to harvest the material world around us to a scale that is astonishing and truly dreadful.

Salt, wood, water, slate, chalk, diamonds, lithium, oil, marble – are extracted from our landscapes on a vast scale. Due to globalization we are deeply disconnected from the extraction of materials, the production of goods and the disposal of goods. Yet, how we utilize the material world is a deeply spiritual issue. It is, I would suggest, *the* spiritual issue of our times. Why?

Bishop Dalcy from the Diocese of Swaziland has written the reflections for this week's theme during the season of creation: acting in solidarity with the poor. She comments how God's preferential option for the poor is rooted in our Biblical text and yet human culture creates winners and losers. At the moment, we 'winners' in the west continue to extract what we want from poorer countries and utilize cheap labour to purchase cheap goods. Ed's photographs reveal how the exploitation of natural resources and the exploitation of people paid to extract them happens simultaneously.

In an interview with journalist, Gaia Vince, Ed Burtynsky talks about his photos in his African studies project. We are going to hear a little bit of that interview now:

GV: Africa is the last big continent that has large amounts of wilderness left. Partly because of colonialism and other extractive industries from the Global North, the industrial revolution in Africa is happening now. So there's this juxtaposition between that wild landscape and these very synthetic landscapes that humans have created – how do you understand that yourself?

EB: The African continent has a lot of wilderness left and there are a lot of resources, like the discovery of oil in Tanzania and northern Kenya and other places. There's a big rush for oil pipelines to be going in there. Particularly with China's involvement, there are a lot of plays to build infrastructure in exchange for access to resources, whether it's farmland for food security, whether it's oil, yellowcake uranium, etc.

It's like economic colonialism. I don't think they want full control of these countries. They want an economic advantage, they want the resources and they want the opportunity those resources provide. For example, the Chinese own the largest deposit of uranium yellowcake in all of the African continent – I photographed that mine.

GV: I also saw your incredible photographs from the shoe factory in Ethiopia. It looks completely transposed from China to Africa.

EB: Some of the photos were taken in Hawassa, which is a 200-acre Special Economic Zone, like Shenzhen in China. The Chinese built what they call sheds, which are more like warehouses. They built 54 of these sheds, with the roadway. So you can look at that picture – with the roadways, with the lighting, with the plumbing, with everything. All done, start to finish, 54 of these were built within one year – all the structures were brought by ship and then by rails into Ethiopia and erected like a Meccano set. And when I was there, they were filling these sheds with sewing machines and textile makers.

GV: The industrial revolution started in England and the factories of the North, and still if we dig down, it's just completely polluted soils and landscapes, and then that was offshored to poorer countries and so on... That cycle is hitting Africa. But where is it going to be offshored next? We can't just keep offshoring. There isn't another place.

EB: I often say that 'this is the end of the road'. We're meeting the end of globalisation and where you can go. And it has to leave China because they're

gagging on the pollution. Their water's been completely polluted. The labour force has said: 'I'm not going to work for cheap wages like this anymore.'

So instead, the Chinese are training textile workers – mainly female – in Ethiopia, and Senegal, and within two or three months, those girls are behind sewing machines and on par with Chinese production rates and what they would've expected out of a Chinese factory. That's their goal. And they're training these young 16, 17-year-olds, taking them away from their families and then putting them right into the sewing machine sweatshop.

EB: Well, I've been following globalism but I started with the whole idea of just looking at nature. That's the category where I began, the idea of 'who's paying the price for our population growth and our success as a species?' Broadly speaking, it's nature. It's the animals, the trees, the prairies, the wetlands, the oceans – that's where the price is being paid, you know, and they're all being pushed back. These are all the natural environments on the planet that we used to coexist with, that we're now totally overwhelming in a way. So nature's at the core – and all my work is really kind of an extended lament for the loss of nature.

To be spiritual today and in the future, to have a 'pioneering spirituality' and to worship God anew, I suggest, will mean a transformed relationship to the material world. This will be deeply challenging for us. I think about the phone I hold in my hand so often, for which lithium is needed; about the computer I look at each day, the car on my drive, the materials that I used to make up all the objects around me are taken from creation at a scale which is unsustainable.

A renewed spirituality then will mean a radical reconnection with matter- a radical reorientating of ourselves in order to see creation as gift and responsibility. To see creation not as a means to an end – but as worthy of existence in itself. That's partly what we do when we gather around the communion table and hold up bread and wine- Gifts of Creation. Sacrament

means transformed material reality: matter becomes inhabited by the divine spirit. Matter is holy – not just people.

It is not crazy then to act differently around holy things- they remind us that all things are holy. Worship is about reverence – we pay honour and respect – we express the value of something through how we conduct ourselves around it. Things are not just objects and commodities – creation is holy.

By practicing reverence in church, we learn to reverence God's gifts to us. If we cannot reverence the things of God, how will we reverence the everyday things?

At the current time there is a huge amount of interest in indigenous cultures as they manifest a way of life that exhibits a profound reverence for the local- its earth, water, animals and air. We look to them and see the complete lack of such reverence in our western cultures. We simply, take, use, throw, take, use, throw. We are extractors and consumers and waste creators. We show no reverence for the earth, its limits, its rhythms, its needs and its goodness.

This is a spiritual crisis of profound depth – that can only be countered by a spiritual revolution. To pay attention is a spiritual discipline. It is, I believe, only with a renewed attention to the created world, that we will learn to reorientate ourselves to God's purposes for creation.