Environment Sunday

Ely Cathedral

Isabella Tree begins her book *Wilding: The return of nature to a British farm* with a quote from Inversnaid, one of Gerald Manley Hopkin's poems:

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

The wild as a category in the human imagination is vital if we are to recover a sense of the importance of the non-human world. It comes at a time when true wilderness has almost completely disappeared from our planet. The human desire to explore, conquer and control has been so ubiquitous, far reaching and successful, that we almost don't realise what we have lost, until we start to live differently.

Robert MacFarlane writes in his book *The Wild Places* that 'wildness is an expression of independence from human direction, and wild land can be said to be self-willed land', in other words, 'land whose habits- the growth of its trees, the movement of its creatures, the free descent of it streams through rocks – are of its own devising and its own execution'.

MacFarlane comments that even though wildness is often portrayed as threatening, dangerous and the opposite of civilization, an alternative tradition sees it as 'the realm of miracle, diversity and abundance'. It is worth noting that Moses is said to encounter God 'beyond the wilderness'. This suggests that to meet with God requires a journey far away from our daily habits and from human domains of control, so far away, its beyond the wilderness. In the Old

Testament God dwells on the mountain, God's own mountain and Moses talks with God in the cover of cloud. God communicates but on God's own terms. And travelling beyond our comfort zones has been part of the Christian understanding of pilgrimage for hundreds of years.

God is not domesticated nor does he arrive at the bidding of humans. God's ultimate freedom and autonomy saves us from the human imagination which is limited and corrupted. We could argue that God is wild – in that God cannot be tamed or controlled or submitted to human will. And it is in the autonomous life of God's creation that we are able to perceive something of the truth, beauty and freedom of God. Such wildness as an attribute of God is captured in the enigmatic figure of John the Baptist – who ate locusts and wild honey. And it manifests itself in the Christian tradition through the longing for solitude, silence and asceticism, in the tradition of the desert fathers and mothers. We need places to go where we are radically challenged by human surrender to what is: to gift and givenness.

Isabella Tree's book about re-wilding Knepp - unsuccessful farm land - challenges us to reconsider the inner logic and beauty of God's creation. The story of the book is an answer to the question: what happens when we step back, let go, surrender? And the answer is that when humans dare to stop we can observe the resilience, diversity and interconnectedness of the created world. Yet, to do such a radical thing, challenges the norms and traditions, not least the aesthetic values we inherit.

Isabella Tree writes: 'aesthetic sensibilities are deeply subjective, and hard to acknowledge and analyze clearly. They bind us to a particular view of the landscape, something we begin to think of as 'natural', or at least benign. Nostalgia, and the sense of security that nostalgia brings, binds us to the

familiar. We are blinded by the immediacy of the present. We look at a landscape and see what is there not what is missing'. (p.146)

Every Vicar or Church Warden who has tried to re-wild their graveyard knows how hard it is to introduce an new aesthetic.

It takes courage to see things differently, even more so to see what isn't there. Other words that describe what happens when our vision is completely renewed are: epiphany, revelation, transformation.

The work of God that is recorded in our scriptures is work that seeks to renew the human vision of what is possible, of what is good, true and beautiful. Such challenges to our inherited or habituated understandings of what is good, true and beautiful can challenge us to our core. It's so easy for us to assume that we stand with the Jesus of the Gospels- we are so used to hearing the stories of challenge to the religious authorities of Jesus' day, that we don't hear the challenge he addresses to us. What would Jesus be saying if he were travelling our roads, entering our towns, walking through our fields and countryside? We have to assume that to encounter the living God is to be disturbed by a presence and holiness that comes from elsewhere. One that will always disrupt our assumptions and values. Nowhere is that more true that in our relation to creation.

'Moses, Moses, come no closer. Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground'.

In moments of connection with God we are challenged by a voice that marks out territory. Holy ground is land that is owned by God for no other purpose than glorification and worship. Yet it is so difficult for humans to accept and let go – to allow God to inhabit and demarcate space that is outside the bounds of

human activity and will. Yet, that principle is essential to the recovery of space for the non-human. We need to let go of space, of the human drive to colonize and to allow the wild to recover itself. To eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, was to seek to know and control all things, and in consequence to give up on wildness, mystery and freedom. To re-enter the garden of Eden is to accept God's unknowability, God's freedom and mystery.

It is the sort of mystery and freedom that we see enacted in the story of the feeding of the five thousand.

Here we see not hard work, cultivation and subjugation, but a free gift that is blessed and sanctified so that it becomes more than the sum of its parts. We see the totally transformative economy of grace:

'Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little'.

And yet all are fed with 12 baskets gathered of the fragments.

On this environment Sunday I have suggested to you that a reacquaintance with the imaginative concept of wildness and the actual reality of wilderness is essential for our spiritual and ecological journeys. The Age of the Anthropocene can be countered by surrendering aspects of human autonomy and control. The literary pilgrimages of nature writers such as MacFarlane help us on that journey. As do the practical projects of re-wilding ignited by the pioneering couple Isabella Tree and Charlie Burrell. Entering into literary landscapes in search of wilderness can be done hand in hand with our reading of scripture and other spiritual texts. The wisdom that is passed down to us is not self-evident, but comes through a continual re-fashioning of our sight so we can understand its application for today. When we are seeking to see what is

not there, we need courage and imagination. And when we are seeking to value what is over what can be used for our purposes, we are challenging decades of instrumentalist thinking. Learning to be with creation as gift and grace is a spiritual discipline, one that Nan Shepherd who wrote the The Living Mountain (1977) had mastered. She concludes the book by writing:

> I believe that I now understand in some small measure why the Buddhist goes on pilgrimage to the mountain. The journey is itself part of the technique by which god is sought. It is a journey into Being; for as I penetrate more deeply into the mountain's life, I penetrate also into my own. For an hour I am beyond desire. It is not ecstasy, that leap out of myself that makes man like god. I am not out of myself, but in myself. I am. To know Being, this is the final grace accorded from the mountain.

Rev'd Imogen Nay

July 2024