

THE PRODIGAL SPECIES
(Luke 15:11-34)

Coming to Ourselves

I look across Marine Parade,
to the sea through
skeletal
Shell Chapel

the ocean beyond full,
surf breaking
white foam nearly
covering all the sand

board riders
patiently waiting
for the right wave

how long will it be
until
the waves crash
against the sea wall
sending spray
through this open-air
place of prayer?

how long will it be
until
we're all surfing
through this village?

how far does
Te Moana nui a Kiwa
need to rise
until
we come to ourselves?

will we need to dig for this shell as well?

the sky and the ocean,
and humanity
are created
as one,
but still
we miss
the connection

© Mark Gibson, February 2019. Level One Café, New Brighton.

Level One Café and Bar in New Brighton is a wonderful place for contemplation. This is as high as you can get in a building in this seaside village these days. You look down to the Pacific Ocean lapping the long sandy beach about 50 metres away. Between the café and the ocean is the road, a promenade, the best-located library in the country, and the Shell Chapel art installation. Seabirds rest up on all the human structures. They are integral to village life. People come and go, mostly walking to and from the beach.

So, there is a lot to look at but in the background is the vastness of the ocean. It is very close, and it is going to get closer. It defines this place, and it has not finished its work. It is restless, and it is on the rise.

Yesterday three of us sat here in Level One reviewing our Community Radio Show called Eastern Rising. We began in spring 2016. We have done 38 programmes. In the last twelve months 581 people have listened to our podcasts. We could carry on along the same line but it is time to evolve. We are going to focus exclusively on interviews that encourage people to talk about climate change. To break down the silence and the denial. We want to hear what people are thinking and feeling about the future, what they think needs to happen, how they are making changes in their lives to meet the looming challenges. The interviews will be on air, and on the internet. Not just audio but also video. We are doing this because we all need to be having these conversations. We want to encourage such conversation.

The New Brighton Union Church, two blocks away, has just been rebuilt. The 2011 earthquakes wrought considerable damage to the old building, and it was demolished in the spring of that year. Our new building stands out because it has been built up. It is single story, but the floor is 1.8 meters above ground level. We are located on a flood plain sandwiched between the Otakaaro Avon River and the Pacific Ocean. In order to gain a resource consent to rebuild we had to go this high. We stand out in the neighbourhood.

As the looming climate crisis bites deeper on the village increased storm surge will impact hugely on the river and bring considerable surface flooding in parts of the village. New Brighton Union Church is in this firing line. Many of the houses around us will potentially be swamped.

This is the context of my reflection on one of Jesus’ most-loved, and best-known parables. The story of the Prodigal Son; sometimes called the parable of the Two Sons.

My eco-theological reading and interpretation of the parable influences my renaming it – “The Parable of the Prodigal Species”.

I have drawn on the interpretative work of Bruce Sanguin. In his book “Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos – An Ecological Christianity (2007). In particular, his suggestion that (pp. 182-185):

“Read through a cosmological lens, the younger son’s insistence on receiving his inheritance immediately mirrors our adolescent stage of development as a species. We are young as planetary beings, relative to say, bacteria. We have not acquired the wisdom, nor steeped ourselves in the intelligence of the Spirit in all of creation. We are an impetuous bunch, demanding the inheritance freely given by 14 billion years of evolution, and squandering it.

“Like the younger son, we find ourselves wallowing in a poisonous atmosphere and in degraded biosystems. We have no one else to blame. Our dignity as an honoured species has been compromised. The food we eat is contaminated and genetically modified. If it were only our own dignity at stake, but we are taking other species down with us.

At a certain point, near starvation, the younger son finally ‘comes to himself’. He realises his foolishness. We on the other hand, have not yet “come to ourselves”.

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The Cambridge English Dictionary says that ‘prodigal’ means “to spend large amounts of money without thinking of the future, in a way that is unwise”. The prodigal is a future eater. That was a term used by Australian scientist Tim Flannery. A prodigal is someone who only lives for the now, for short-term benefit, and to hell with the long-term consequences.

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In terms of Jesus’ teaching the prodigal son is the foolish man building his house on the sand.

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There is an existential edge to this parable that we often miss. We miss the fact that the youngest son ended up destitute with nothing to eat. His own survival was on the line. He was in a perilous situation. As far as his father was concerned he WAS dead. When His son returned he told his household “this son of mine was dead but has now come back to life”.

Yes, he is speaking metaphorically, and spiritually, but there is a truth being expressed here. His son had not chosen life, but the pathway to death. His denial of his relationships,

and his totally unsustainable lifestyle was a highway to oblivion. “Coming to his senses” or “coming to himself” was a realisation that he had chosen death rather than life. On this path he had no future.

This hard truth is being expressed powerfully through Extinction Rebellion, a new movement that has emerged globally during the last year. They are naming the climate emergency as an existential crisis for humanity as a species.

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When we see the sons in this parable not just as individuals but as collectives; or even species, it immediately becomes challenging. On our present pathway we are the younger son impetuously, wantonly, recklessly eating our future.

In terms of the climate crisis or emergency Bruce Sanguin’s assertion that “we haven’t yet come to ourselves” is deeply disturbing.

It begs the question, “So, what will it take until we do?” How much disruption of day to day life will it take? How desperate do things need to get? Are we hellbent on self-destruction? Do we have an unconscious death-wish? As a species, are we suicidal?

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The irony is that it is the young who are increasingly trying to wake us up and bring us to ourselves on the climate emergency. As I write this reflection plans are well afoot for the School student climate strike on March 15 here in Christchurch. It is being co-ordinated by a twelve-year old schoolgirl called Lucy Gray. There are going to be similar strikes in the other main centres.

This movement is sweeping through Europe, Australia and many parts of the world. It began with Swedish schoolgirl Greta Thunberg. The movement has largely been led by girls and young women. Organisers say that young people are sick of waiting for adults to save their world and give them a sense of future.

What is being revealed is that it is the older generations who are not wising up, not evolving to a mature understanding of who we are in relation to each other and the community of life.

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It can be revealing, even disturbing to read the comments section after reading online articles. Following an article on the forthcoming school student climate strike in Christchurch many of the responses were extremely critical of the young people. Calling them all sorts of things.

Some adults however spoke truth to power:

*“Out of the mouths of babes.
The kids putting we adults to shame.
We are trashing the world and turning a blind eye to the carnage.
What a legacy to leave our kids!
The denialism evident in many of the comments here,
leads me to the view, that humanity could well be toast”.*

An another:

*“Grown adults getting upset about children asking them not to destroy the environment.
People love calling younger generations selfish and self-absorbed.
In reality it’s the older generations who can’t face scientific fact,
that are selfish and entitled. Unbelievable”.*

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Who is the older brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Species? Bruce Sanguin muses that it could be an Amazonian macaw sitting at a safe distance from the ‘welcome home’ party. He suggests that we might ‘get’ his resentment and caution, given that humanity has wiped out 99% of his family. So, in our context the older brother could be a Little Spotted Kiwi, or a kokako. He’s watching on, waiting to see if we have changed. He doesn’t yet trust that we’re going to act any differently. He is weary of our species, and with good reason. He is understandably asking, have they truly repented? Have they totally changed direction and taken a much humbler place within the community of life?

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From a climate justice perspective, the older brother also echoes the resentment, anger and sense of entitlement of the ‘haves’ who are resistant to paying for the cost of transitioning third world economies towards greener energy and technologies, and to enabling ‘the have nots’ to adapt to climate disruption, and its consequences.

Climate justice recognises that those least responsible for climate change, the poorest, usually suffer its gravest consequences. They are least equipped to adapt to the changing climate. They receive an unfair share of disaster relief and are the least covered by insurance.

So, there is a strong ethical and political dimension that requires richer nations to carry the greater financial cost of climate change.

But like the older brother rather than having an ethic of being their brother’s/sister’s keeper they are driven by a sense of who is deserving and who is undeserving. A reward-oriented way of seeing the world. That those who have done well being further rewarded.

The older brother unlike the younger brother doesn’t seem to have a “coming to himself” moment. Such an epiphanic experience expands one’s sense of self. There is a realisation that I am bigger than me. That I am part of and connected to others, and to all the

community of life. Maybe it was the pigs who sparked the epiphany. In the sty he understood himself for the first time as part of a whole, as a person-in-community.

The older brother is tragically stuck in a rewards-punishment world-view and doesn't see his well-being as tied up with that of his brother. His brother is a competitor more than a brother. He fails to see that the return of his brother is good for both.

Rich nations have a similar struggle. They don't see that what is good for the poorest in terms of climate justice is also good for them. They are locked into a competitive orientation, always obsessing over what they will lose rather than what they could gain.

They also refuse to consider the wellbeing and rights of other species in the community of life. They resent limits on economic growth.

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The Father in the parable is the one who holds it all together. The divine presence at the heart of creation. The sparkle on the river even when it is seriously polluted. Calling us and welcoming us back into relationship. The one who feels the broken relationships intensely. The healing agent.

Hear the Father again telling the angry older son: "You are always with me, and everything I have is yours".

This brings us back to our total interdependence and connectedness as a species with all of creation, each other and God.

When we separate ourselves out (younger brother) or put ourselves above (older brother) we violate this sacred fabric of who we are.

The father graciously seeks to weave it all together again. This holistic work is central to our task of doing climate justice.



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