

The Vanishing Garden ...A reflection by Peter Thomas, JPIC Team



In the beginning the Universe was a great cloud of swirling gases. Over billions of years stars and galaxies were formed and with them meteors, comets and planets, including the earth. Stories of creation from the Christian tradition and elsewhere speak of a great primeval chaos out of which the Creator fashioned order and beauty and a garden where life could be nourished and grow. The Earth our garden planet in ancient cultures called mother, sustainer, the source and nurturer of life.

Today we think of the Universe as over 20 billion years old and that life on earth has only been possible by the interaction and interconnection of energies over this vast sweep of time. Life as we know it with all its vibrancy and colour cannot be taken for granted as it depends so much on a continuing harmony between all the creatures on the planet. And one of those

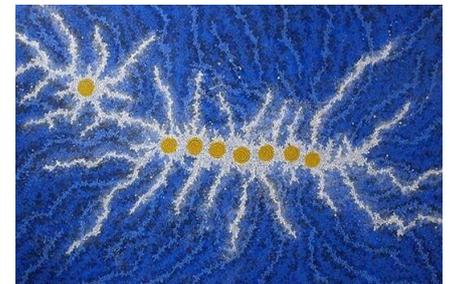
creatures, humankind, threatens to disrupt that harmony and perhaps destroy the garden forever.

From the time of Captain Cook's arrival at Botany Bay through until our present day much of our understanding of our First Nation's peoples is a European construct. Even the name Aborigines is given by Europeans. Early Colonists and Settlers constructed their knowledge based on the English hierarchical and patriarchal society from which they came. Their understanding of land and ownership was antithetical to our indigenous cultures of which there were perhaps between four to five hundred different peoples. Just as those early European settlers constructed 'aboriginality', so too Western civilization has constructed a view on humankind's relationship to the earth.

In the book of Genesis there are two separate accounts of the creation of the world. In the first God commands humankind to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it. At first glance this would seem to be license to dominate and subdue the natural world and it has certainly been understood in that way for much of the history of Western

civilization. The second creation account from Genesis describes the planting of a beautiful garden after which God took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it. Cultivate, nurture, care; these are God's commands. Unfortunately, down through the millennia Western civilization has often ignored these wider responsibilities. We have opted instead to focus on just one dimension of the Genesis story and have seen it as our right, our God given right to treat the Earth as if it was ours to plunder.

All human cultures have had



their creation stories but we have to look beyond Western culture to find stories which describe the completely harmonious relationship between the earth and the human community. Our First Nations peoples have their Dreaming, a narrative of how the world had come to be created with an emphasis on how everything was interconnected with everything else, with

nature; trees, rocks, mountains, streams and so on. Nature is seen as something not to be trampled on and exploited but a living system that sustains and interacts with humanity.

In a now famous letter written to the American President in 1854, Indian Chief Seattle responded to government requests to buy his tribes land by asking, "How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land, if we do not own the freshness of the air and sparkle of the water, how can you buy them from us? Every part of the earth is sacred to my people."



The religious traditions of the West have had a different emphasis. The philosophers of ancient Greece and of the Judeo-Christian world have set God apart, above and beyond the natural world. A God of power who might occasionally intervene in nature but does not really live within it. To strive for God is to reach beyond the natural world, beyond the daily experience to the heavenly realm above. This separation has led to an attitude of domination which is at the heart of our current ecological crisis.

Over the last few centuries, particularly since the industrial evolution an added attitude to the earth, a new and destructive

power. Sir Isaac Newton often called the father of modern science described the physical world as resembling a complex, finely-tuned machine, something like a mechanical clock. Newton's world shows a natural world that works perfectly but which like a clock has no real spirit of its own. In this age we have even developed a very mechanical view of ourselves, surrounded by machines and computers which protect us from interaction from the natural world.

Our lives become governed by the rhythm of the clock and the notifications on our phone. So mechanical has human life become that we often describe ourselves and our actions in technological terms. Corporate theory refers to workers as units; the mind a computer; information is input; the reaction of others is feedback. All of these draw us away from the enriching interaction with the natural world.

Planet earth is choking. Each year billions of tons of carbon dioxide are injected into the atmosphere. The burning of coal, exhausts from cars, the widespread use of inorganic fertilisers- all these produce carbon dioxide and other dangerous gases on a massive scale. The price we pay for global warming. And the magnitude of the destruction of the world's rainforests is well-known. Complex eco-systems are being ravaged.

From the time of the industrial revolution mass-production became the norm and ever



increasing quantities of the world's natural resources were acquired to fuel the process. The God-given value of work combined with the new industry to produce the 'work-ethic' a principle that held that wealth derived from hard work and use of the earth's resources was a sign of God's favour. It is only in the last 30 years that we have begun to see flaws in that equation. The earth's resources are finite. Unbridled 'development' will ultimately result not in the blessing of wealth but in the curse of environmental destruction.

Our challenge is to see the earth as a priceless resource, to be used wisely, to be held as sacred.



Planet earth, our vanishing garden is in great need of care, a care we can only embrace when we recognize the sacred interconnection between all of creation, including humankind.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR CARMELITE JPIC TEAM

This year we celebrate 10 years of the Carmelite JPIC Commission in its present form. Following on from last month we introduce you to each of our JPIC team. This month we invite you to meet **JOSHUA VUGRICH'**:



“Pope Francis has an inspiring quote I reflect on often: “Peace must be built on justice, on integral human development, on respect for human rights, on the protection of creation” (Twitter, May 20 2017). I find Francis’ pontificate consistently encourages us to be a people who build a culture of justice – encounters founded on dialogue, relationship, mutuality, openness to the other and respect for the natural world. Drawing on the story of Elijah as prophet of justice, Whitefriars College has spent over a decade building partnership with the Carmelite family in Timor-Leste.

In 2013, I was blessed to have my first experience of accompanying our students on immersion to that beautiful country. I can honestly say it was a transformative experience! The rich culture, hospitality and stories of hope challenged my belief-system of what justice was, supporting me to appreciate the Catholic principle of solidarity – one of ‘walking-with’.

Upon returning to Australia, a colleague and I developed a program in partnership with the Carmelites in Timor-Leste to deliver to the novices in Hera, Dili. The program would be facilitated by college staff, and sought to foster partnerships by the teaching of introductory philosophy. We explored the big questions of life, learning how the great thinkers of the Western philosophical tradition would respond to them. Then in that dialogue we learned in return how the Timorese worldview answers these same questions! We felt so humbled to be invited into their lives and journey with them on the road of formation. A chance trip changed me. Justice is a process, many steps and even missteps along the way – but I think it is those small, daily and sometimes unexpected encounters which have the potential to build the reign of God and change the world.”

WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR THE CARE OF CREATION

- next **TUESDAY, 1st September** promulgated by Pope Francis in 2015.

SEASON OF CREATION each week for the month of September JPIC Team will be sending out some thoughts for your reflection. This year, the theme for the season is “Jubilee for the Earth”. We invite you to consider the integral relationship between rest for the Earth and ecological, economic, social and political ways of living.



LET US PRAY FOR THE NEEDS OF THOSE REFLECTED IN THE SOCIAL JUSTICE STATEMENT – TO BE CELEBRATED ON SOCIAL JUSTICE ... SUNDAY 30th AUGUST

Jesus, you invite us all into the fullness of life. May we support one another to flourish in body, mind and spirit. Strengthen our commitment to ensure that nobody falls through gaps in our systems of care.

People called you mad. Help us to recognise you in those who suffer mental ill-health today.

Show us how to eliminate stigmatisation of mental ill-health from our parishes, schools, communities and organisations.

You drew near to those who were suffering in body or mind. May we too feel your nearness when we struggle with mental health challenges. May we be one as members of Your Body.

You invite us to share in your ministry of love and true compassion. May we be empowered by your Spirit to reach out to all people in need. May we build communities of welcome and inclusion. Amen