

# Planetary Pentecost

**Mark Rotherham** reflects on the importance of connecting with our feelings to bring about transformation

**W**e are systematically destroying the fragile womb of our own existence. But whether we talk of deforestation, desertification, pollution, poverty, overpopulation, peak oil, global warming or mass extinction, the ecological crisis has only one cause and one solution: the way we live!

The living ecosystems on which all life forms depend are now so severely compromised that if we are to avert an irreversible ecological breakdown we have to accelerate social change on a scale not seen previously, except when mobilising for war. We continue, however, to chug full throttle aboard a titanic fossil-fuel economy. Unless we act now to throw its gears into reverse and steer hard on a radically different course our civilisation will collide with the ecological iceberg lying directly in our path. This is not 'scaremongering', this is reality. Can we as Christians face up to it?

To make the necessary shift in our cognitive and spiritual perceptions, in our thoughts and feelings about the Earth, we have to be willing to undergo something of a conversion experience. We have to make a profound shift from ego-self to eco-self; from a consumerist lifestyle to a way of life that sustains the natural world. We need a new planetary Pentecost!

Reconnection to our feelings through rituals of grief and the gift of tears offers a route to transformation. The wisdom of lament reminds us of this prophetic antidote to collective denial. Communal expressions of grief can open our hearts and minds and bear witness to destructive behaviours within the wider church and society. Depth psychologist, James Hillman, writes: 'Emotions are mainly social. The word comes from the Latin *ex movere*, to move out. Emotions connect to the world.'

We are not used to regarding our feelings as a source of wisdom. In the process of promoting the superiority of the rational intellect Western culture has become emotionally illiterate. We have

muted the deep sources of ecological information that well within the body and allowed innate sensitivities that once connected us with all other beings to atrophy. Body language is older than words.

Theologian, Harvey Cox, comments on the political nature of personal feelings: 'We need to give vent to our massive pain and fear. A people must move from muteness to outcry if it is ever going to take the next step.' Our pain is massive because it is global in extent. We feel the suffering Earth. To advance social change and mobilise rapid transition to a zero-carbon economy we need to unleash the full creative expression bound up with our feelings.

During his trauma at Gethsemane Jesus shook his disciples from their sleep, urging them to stay awake. In a time of crisis they were not to become apathetic. The word 'apathy' means 'to be without feeling'. It is the opposite of compassion, which means 'to suffer with'. Jesus taught that God is a God of compassion, leaving no doubt that God suffers with Creation.

Why does Jesus call us to be like God in this way? Why does he want us to be open to the pain of others? In the context of ecological crisis, while corporations clamour to sell us every type of packaged pleasure, why does Jesus want us to suffer with the Earth?

Repression and denial take a mammoth toll on our energy and on our sensitivity to the world around us. Renowned activist and teacher, Joanna Macy, writes: 'Repression is not a local anaesthetic. If we won't feel pain, we won't feel much else either – both loves and losses are less intense, the sky less vivid, pleasures muted.' Treating US soldiers traumatised by war in Vietnam, Dr Robert Lifton observed much the same thing: 'The mind pays for its deadening to the state of the world by giving up its capacity for joy and flexibility.' He coined the term 'psychic numbing' and said it was 'the disease of our times'. Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, had

understood this: 'The truth that many people never understand until it's too late', he said, 'is that the more you try to avoid suffering, the more you suffer.'

Christians have always known that bearing the cross with Jesus is a redemptive act. Feeling with and witnessing to the suffering Earth releases the spiritual energy for change and healing. The way of compassion leads us deeper into life. Jesus promised his followers the joy of 'life in all its fullness'. This has always been the deep hunger of the human heart.

St Paul writes: 'Creation groans in travail awaiting the children of God.' The children of God will feel the Earth's travail within their own bodies and be motivated to respond with co-creative works of liberation and healing. The word 'motivate' shares the same root as the word 'emotion' and comes from the Latin *motare*, which means to shake or stir. One thinks of the first Apostles who shook with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. We need a new planetary Pentecost!

'The gentle shall inherit the Earth,' says Jesus. In the context of mass extinction caused by our violent ecological footprint, it becomes clear that we will have to live lightly – gently – on the Earth if we are to remain a viable member of the Earth community.

We welcome a new planetary Pentecost! ■

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