

Echoes of Intimacy

We reveal and reflect their creativity to Mother Earth and Mother God

In reflecting recently on Pope Francis Encyclical *Laudato Si*, there was a stirring deep within me and the following memory of time past surfaced:-

'I want,' she said, 'to live more deeply. My life is flat. It has no echoes.' It was the kind of remark you tend to remember. With several painful relationships behind her, and a dismal Scottish tour with a doomed country and western trio, Shirley was now searching for a more meaningful life.

As often happens, late at night after long days, certain words, faces and moments flash across my mind before I go to sleep. Shirley's poetic, spontaneous little soul-cry reminded me of many empty moments in my own life, moments when I feel trapped in my blindness, quarantined within my own limitations. Something reachable remains just beyond my grasp; something attainable beckons from too far away. The last time it happened was when I was travelling west along the M62. Just where the sign says 'You are now at the highest motorway point (372m) in England', I pulled over and looked around me at the long vista of the Yorkshire Dales

stretching for ever to distant horizons on both sides of me. With the changing light, the shifting shadows and the sudden mists, I sensed an enchanted world out there, but one from which I felt excluded. It was then that I began again to fret because I could not



really feel part of that spare beauty around me. I could not enter into it, resonate with it, and be fulfilled by it, expand with it, flow with it. It was as though an invisible filter blurred its impact on my soul; as though I were a spectator at something out there, distant and detached. There was no resonance between us, no 'echoes,' as Shirley had put it. My distress was nothing new. In recent years I have grieved over the loss of some magical qualities I had enjoyed as a child.

As I sat and reflected somewhat anxiously on these things, two lines of thought arose, in quick succession, in my mind. They emerged as a pair of disarmingly simple images calling me into another more contemplative way of looking at things. One – what I call the mirror image – sprang from a belief about the part that each one of us plays in the continuing story of our growing world. As I was gazing at the undulating hills of heather, I tried to see myself as a mirror reflecting back to Mother Nature what she looked like, through the eyes of her own child, me.



'Reflecting in the consciousness of each one of us,' wrote Teilhard de Chardin, 'evolution is becoming aware of itself.' At some point creation became reflexive in giving birth to the human mind. This mind, according to John O'Donoghue, 'is the mirror in which creation can behold itself. In the human mind the earth becomes conscious and aware.' Half-felt intimations were now becoming clearer. I saw myself as begotten by the world itself, flesh of her flesh and now needed by her, to bring home to her the unique beauty of her ever-changing face. Our human eyes feedback to Mother Earth what she looks like in every turning of the world's light. Without this moment the

song of life would be forever unfinished, the universal story incomplete. These faint whisperings are too far-fetched for some: they are utterly and mystically natural for those others who feel in their bodies and souls the same heartpulse as the universe. So there, in that high lay-by, I thought, 'I am a mirror for Gaia.' (Thus named by the Greeks who saw the earth as a living, sensitive, growing mother; a term brought to current usage by the scientist James Lovelock and celebrated now by many of our best theologians.) Without us she would never know her allurements, never delight in the beauty that captivated the souls of her human

family. We have sprung from her womb. A spirituality of creation forever reminds us of this truth. Something dies when it is forgotten.

That afternoon a lost intimacy was restored when I felt myself to be my earth mother's mirror; a weakened bond was strengthened when I rejoiced in this special gift I could lay before her. In the grand scale of things I had my unique and necessary role to echo uniquely back to her what she could not see for herself. 'Welcome home,' she says, 'I have missed and mourned you. Where have you been?'



As the eyes are to the body, so are we to the cosmos – and to God. This brings me to my second image – the window. God created the world so as eventually to become human in it, and therefore to enjoy all human experiences. God so loved the world that God assumed human nature in order to enjoy it. The Incarnational Theology of the mystics holds that if God is to continue rejoicing in that created divine beauty, then all our eyes and senses are needed to be windows of wonder for God on to the strange beauty of, for instance, even those lonely moors and peat bogs.

The Risen Christ told St Teresa that he needed her eyes to look with love on people and places. 'The real aim,' wrote Simone Weil, 'is not to see God in all things; it is that God, through us, should see the things that we can see.' And touch the things that we can touch. And hear the things that we can hear. The theological giant Karl Barth, somewhat infatuated with the music of Mozart, surmised that when the horn concerto is on at full swell, 'then our dear Lord listens with special pleasure.'

And do we dismiss too soon the stories of children playing their drums for God, or squeezing God in next to them for a ride and a chat in their new red and shiny fire-engines? After all, 'God is sheer joy,' wrote St Thomas Aquinas, when asked why God made the world, 'and sheer joy demands company.'

In Sheep Fair Day, Kerry Hardy writes:-

I took God with me to the sheep fair.

I said, 'Look there's Liv, sitting on the wall waiting;

These are pens, these are sheep,

This is their shit we are walking in, this is their fear.'

Then I let God sip tea, boiling hot, from a cup,

And I lent God my fingers to feel how they burned

When I tripped on a stone and it slopped.

'This is hurt,' I said, 'there'll be more.'



Such awareness makes the familiar delightfully unfamiliar again. The senses become thresholds to the Mystery, revealing an astonishing immediacy and intimacy with the universe and its' Creator. You find yourself doing things you haven't done since you were a child – chatting to God as you walk or drive along, pointing out this and that, as you round each new bend in the road. You re-enter, in a completely new way, the childhood of play and wonder you once lived – but left too soon.

And what will Shirley make of all of this? Will she dismiss it as too cerebral, too remote, or will it help her find, in some corner of her lonely heart, that eternal echo of intimacy for which she longs?'

Yes, as I welcomed 'Laudato Si', the memory above freely surfaced for me, barely the tip of the iceberg. This encyclical is a powerful challenge on many levels to open our heart, to delve into the echoes of the imagination, to know with joy, who we really are as part of the entire cosmos, it's implications regarding a sense of belonging, responsibility, awareness and care of creation.

