**1.5**

**‘The world is charged with the grandeur of God’[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**the challenge of being creatures in a threatened Creation**

**[Ian]** Welcome and welcome to country.

**Prelude**

**[J]** It is great delight for Graeme and I to have been invited to engage with you in these conversations – and to be finally gathered together.

We will begin with a short invocation.

‘The world is charged with the grandeur of God’: being creatures in a threatened creation. **(\*IMAGE 1 – Series Title) flash up and then off.**

We acknowledge that we humans are a part of the great web of creation that precedes us and sustains us. At BUC the olive tree is a central symbol of our life together and a living presence among us. Here it is.

**(\*IMAGE 2a– Olive Tree)**

The tree was planted in 2005. The memorable story of that event will be posted online. It’s really worth a look!

We honour this reality together in this simple prayer:

**(\*IMAGE 2b - Prayer)** Words on screen:

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God*

*For the grandeur of this olive tree*

*Thanks be to God*

Let us say this prayer aloud together – we will pause for a moment after each line

**(\*IMAGE 3a – Bowl of olives)**

Had we been able to meet face to face, we wanted to have a lovely bowl of olives in our midst. But we will do the best we can on zoom. We invite you to pick your bowl of olives (if you are ready to do so) and take one. Then you might like to say aloud the words on the screen. Participants to join in one by one if they would like to.

**(\*IMAGE 3b – Sacramental words)**

*I am grateful that olives are with us in the world*

**(Unshare screen)**

**[J] I. Our situation**

***a) Aim:*** First, a few words about the overall aim of this series of ‘conversations’ (as we have called them). The umbrella title of the series is taken from GMH’s famous poem, *God’s Grandeur*. If you have the poem with you might like to follow the text.

**[G]** *Read the poem*

**God’s Grandeur**

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

    It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

    It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

    And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

    And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

    There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

    Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

    World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

**[J]** Hopkins speaks explicitly from a Christian perspective. The world – *this* world in which we live – is God’s *creation*. That is its deepest essence; its inmost identity. As such, he believes, the world is brim full – ‘*charged’* – with the grandeur of God. A grandeur that flames out from the world ‘like shining from shook foil’. A grandeur that gathers to greatness in the world ‘like the ooze of oil crushed’. The poet has in mind here Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, under the olive branches. He is about to be crushed by the forces of evil. His life will be poured out; oil from the olive press. This *is* God’s grandeur. The grace that redeems the world.

But humans have not reckoned rightly with this inmost worldly identity. Humans have trampled on the Earth with heavy industrial boots that cannot – or will not – feel the damage they are inflicting. Now the Earth is ‘seared’, ‘bleared’ and ‘smeared’ with human trade, and human industry, and human stench.

And yet for all this damage, Hopkins believes, ‘nature is never spent’. ‘There lives the dearest freshness deep down things’ … ‘Because the Holy Ghost over the bent/world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.’

The poem is a brilliant, but sombre, expression of faith in God the creator; and faith in the world, ourselves included, as God’s creatures. It was written 144 years ago. But it is eerily prescient of our times. Only now a much heavier question mark hangs over that sentence, ‘nature is never spent’. The last 50 years have seen our consumer societies and extractive industries spend nature’s resources prodigally, with little thought of limits or of consequences.

In 2021 the world – the world supposedly charged with the grandeur of God – is calling us to account; on a global scale. Our theological challenge is whether we can believe, and even more whether we can *live* in our times, the truth that ‘the Holy Ghost over the bent/ world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.’

How are we to live as creatures in a threatened creation? That is the overarching question of this series.

[J]  ***(b) Our Current Context:*** The issue of climate change – or more broadly stated – the disruption of Earth’s ecological systems, large and small, is a major – many (Graeme and me included) think *the* major – threat to the life, health and future of humans, and vast numbers of other creatures that share the world with us. And the threat is becoming daily more urgent.

A couple of years ago, Naomi Klein wrote a terrific book on climate change which she called, *This Changes Everything*. Climate Change is global. That’s its nature. It affects everything and everyone. The World Council of Churches agrees. It has declared a climate *emergency* ‘which demands an urgent and unprecedented response by *everyone everywhere*.’ Our own Synod in February this year acknowledged this declaration in its Resolution 19 (c), which (I think) was moved by Ian Ferguson.

We *all* have to make some response in our own particular situations; even if our response is to turn away: ‘It’s all too hard. I don’t want to talk about it!’

Clearly politicians *have* to respond; and they do variously! But so do teachers, that deal daily with young people who are deeply – and rightly – concerned for their futures. And businesses – insurance companies, for example, face a massive challenge, as became obvious in those recent bush fires. And lawyers. And doctors. And farmers. And … and

And so do Churches. People of faith. Us. We have been asked by our community of BUC, which in turn is responding to what the 2021 Synod has said, to think about this and what implications it has for *our* faith and life. We are not going to argue that this emergency is real and urgent. That scientific case has been made painstakingly.

Resolution 19 (a) reads: That the Synod resolve: … ‘to acknowledge that God calls us to live in harmony with our natural environment and to seek justice and well-being for all creation.’

Suppose we were to agree with that resolution. What exactly might those words mean for us at BUC? Mean for our worship, our prayer, our theology, our action in the world? There is no ducking the fact that trying to answer questions like this is hard. The Synod itself notes that ‘there is a diversity of theological perspectives on how we … should respond to the natural environment’ (p. 2). Such diversity undoubtedly exists within *our* faith community. Just as it exists in our society and politics. And it might well be just as explosive at times in the church as it is in society! But this is the task we have set ourselves.

Climate change is a ‘wicked problem’, as George Marshall has called it.[[2]](#footnote-2) Meaning it is very large, very complicated, continually changing (usually for the worse), and operating on many levels at once on land, in the sea and through the atmosphere. Moreover, it operates on many levels in our own selves – our thoughts, feelings, relationships; our economics, politics, and sense of identity. So it’s bound to be messy, complex, and controversial. In agreeing to have a go at it in a series of conversations like this, we need to be sensitive, kind and supportive of each other.

There is no way that we (Graeme and I) have ‘answers’. We have opinions and views, of course, but they are very much work in progress. Our views need critique and expansion in conversation with you. We are hoping that what happens in these sessions will be generated by all of us together, sharing our thoughts, prayers, feelings. And hopefully some laughter, hope and encouragement along the way.

If the world really is ‘charged with the grandeur of God’, what does it mean to be creatures in God’s grandeur at a time when such divine grandeur is under serious threat from our own human activities in the world? That’s our question.

**[J] (\*IMAGE 4 – Overview)**

An overview of the journey we are embarking on. – Introduce it. A fuller version will be up online.

*Questions and comments.*

**(\*IMAGE 5 – Conversation Title)**

**[G] 3. Conversation 1: The ‘solid speech’ of God: one in … all in**

**(Unshare screen)**

***a) Introduction:***

We have titled session one: ‘The solid speech of God: one in … all in’. That’s a bit enigmatic; and is meant to be! We’ll clarify it as we go along. Try to keep the phrase in mind – God’s *solid speech*. If there is one thing we’d like you to take away from *this* conversation it’s that phrase and what it means: *The solid speech of God.*

Early in the Book of Revelation, as you know, St John writes a separate letter to each of 7 churches – Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and so on. The letters are recorded in chapters 2 and 3 of the Book. John has something quite different to say to each of these churches. But to all seven he has *one* thing to say in common. It is this. ‘Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches’ (Rev 2.7 etc.). 7 times in 7 different contexts.

Notice that John does *not* say’ ‘listen to what *I* am saying’. Though he has just had quite a lot to say, and that human speaking of his is important to the job at hand. But John says, ‘listen to what the *Spirit* is saying’; listen to what *God* is saying to the church. And notice, too, that he refers to this speech of God in the present continuous tense. Listen to what God *is saying*. Now. Here. The Word of God, which is the Spirit of God, addresses the church *now*. It always has. The Word of God is always context related. It speaks to our life. And our life is now and here.

Of course, it is important to listen to what *has* been said in the past. Those punchy letters of John to the churches are vital. But it is not the letters, with their words on the page as such, that are the focal object of attention. It is the voice of the *Spirit* that comes to the churches *through* them that matters. Revelation is ‘*God’s* eloquence, *God’s* speaking out’, as the theologian John Webster puts it.[[3]](#footnote-3) Revelation is God’s *self*-presentation to us. Yes, John’s letters matter; but not in themselves. They are important as a *means*, *a channel*, of *God’s* utterance. *God’s* self-giving to us. The Spirit, not the letter, gives life. God ‘has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant,’ says Paul in 2 Cor. 3.5, ‘not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life’.

This communicative dynamic pretty much defines what the spiritual life is; indeed what the church is. Each generation of believers has been challenged to do this careful spiritual listening ever since. Now we, in turn, are seeking to listen to what the Spirit of God is saying to us in our context. Now. Here.

Listening to the Spirit like this has rarely been plain sailing. The seven churches receiving those letters from John found it very confronting indeed! Jesus battled spiritual deafness amongst his followers right up to the moment of his death. ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? (Jn 10.9).

And so to sum up. I think we can say this, at least as a starting point:

1. listening to what the Spirit is saying to the church now; listening to the Word of God in our time of deep ecological crisis is the task facing us. And
2. we have a fair idea that engaging in such listening seriously is likely to be challenging.

**[G] *2. The Word of God/the voice of the Spirit.***

We are going to use the terms ‘Word of God’ and ‘voice of the Spirit’ pretty much interchangeably in these conversations. In scripture the two phrases are distinguishable, but definitely not separable. Both refer to the *mode* of God’s being in the world. God is with us as a *communicating* presence. ‘An eloquence’, to use John Webster’s striking phrase.

At this point, I need to make just a tiny technical detour. Very quick. You hardly notice it! This divine eloquence is a *Trinitarian* eloquence. *God* is the source of the communication. God reaches out in grace to us. In our tradition, that approaching eloquence, that Word spoken to us, is uttered definitively in Jesus Christ. But this *Christological* Word is not a piece of information that we didn’t have before. It is life, truth, judgment, grace, as the Gospel story makes plain. The *Holy Spirit* makes this God-Word eloquently uttered in Christ alive in our hearts. God-Christ-Spirit – that Trinitarian operation is the dynamics of revelation. And that is what we are invited to enter into! Karl Barth, the great 20th century theologian, puts it this way.

God speaks about *Godself* in God’s word. Everything that God says to us depends upon the fact that when God speaks to us, God does not say this or that, but God speaks Godself. This self-declaration is the life and truth and reality of God’s word. It means that we are no longer alone, no longer without God, but through God’s word, we are placed in covenant with God. Though we have turned away from God, God’s word is the covenant-making turning of God toward us.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The question is *how*. How do we enter into that divine self-declaration responsibly?

*Breakout groups:*

We are now going to break into groups.

**Ian to introduce.**

We will have 10 minutes. It would be good if each group appointed a person to keep a bit of a record of what is said to bring back to all of us.

Our Sunday morning worship is our best, shared effort to ‘listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches’. So let us spend a little time thinking about our Sunday morning worship, with this question in mind*:*

**(Ian: This to be send to groups as reminder of task)**

***How do we at BUC go about attending to the Word of God/Voice of the Spirit in our life together?***

Think concretely about the way the service runs. How do we do it? How do we begin? What are the components of the service? What resources do we use to help open us to what the Spirit is saying? Are some things more important than others?

There will be a warning message with one minute to go.

Any questions?

**Go into breakout groups …**

**Regather at the end and hear reports from each group.**

You might like to put some main points of your group up in the chat room.

[Notes for Graeme:

List suggestions on board: prayer, reading the bible, preaching, songs, water (font), Table, bread, wine, flowers – cf Col 3.16!

*Q. Do you think any of these have a more primary, more important, place than others?*

I want to focus now on 3 things we regularly *say* in our worship service:

*a) What is said at the conclusion of the reading of scripture?* – ‘For these words of witness and for Christ the word, thanks be to God’.

*Q. What does that really mean? What is the witness to? What are we giving thanks for?*

(i) The ‘words of witness’ (that is the words read from scripture) are witnessing, pointing to, directing our attention to the *Word of God*; the eloquence of God; the self-giving of God into our lives, as Barth put it. Contrast other ways (Anglican) of acknowledging scripture: ‘This is the word of the Lord.’ That choice of language has the danger of identifying the words of the Bible a bit too directly with the Word of God. BUCs way of putting our thanks for the Word (God’s eloquence) respects John’s distinction between his letters on the page and the voice of the Spirit. God’s eloquence is never captured in a framework of human words; never becomes *our* possession.

(ii) The thanksgiving acknowledges the definitive centrality of Jesus Christ in the mediation of the Word of God. Christ is identified with the Word or at least very closely linked to the Word. Anglicans stand for the reading of the Gospel. Same point. Again note the Trinitarian form.

*b) What is said at the beginning of the sermon?* ‘May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer.’

*Q. What is this prayer asking for?*

That the words spoken by the preacher, which are based on the words read from scriptures, might become a genuine medium for the Word of God, God’s self-declaration, to us. And that our *listening* may be attuned to that living Word. All this is the work of the Holy Spirit. We cannot make it happen. We can only pray that God will make it happen.

*c) Acknowledgment of Country:* ‘We acknowledge and respect the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, the traditional custodians of this land since time immemorial. We are learning that the land is not ours to own, but to look after, and that if we listen we may hear in it the calling of the Eternal Spirit.’

Note the reference to the Spirit calling here. We will come back to this in Conversation 6.

d) Q. *What about the non-verbal channels of the WoG in our worship? What are they?*

water of the font, table of communion, the flowers, candle. Stained glass windows, gestures …

*Q. Are these involved in the eloquence of God? If so how?*

Let’s look at the sacramental materials in our worship. What does the water in the font at the front of the church ‘say’ to us? Or the bread and wine? - God calls us, cleanses us, and incorporates us into Christ’s body. God gives Godself to us as our nourishment and life; forgives us; draws us into God’s own life.

*Well, why don’t we just say those things in plain language and get on with it?*

– because just saying it won’t do. It isn’t enough. Just saying it doesn’t convey what cries out to be conveyed. The water, the bread and wine, ‘speak out’ the eloquence of God in another way from words; they mediate things, ‘tell’ us things to us that go beyond our human language. These items we might say are ‘solid words’ of God, if we can attend to them appropriately. One of the things that such solid words remind us of is that God is a mystery that goes way beyond us and is never captured by our thought or words. God is the mystery of the World, all the world, not just the human world, and water, bread, wine, flowers remind us forcibly of this otherness of God. But they also remind us of the sacredness of the world, that the power of being is a visible gift of the grace and love of God.

Take the font. The water of baptism is what we might call (following the theologian Jean-Luc Marion) a ‘saturated phenomenon’. It is full to overflowing with significance, it is literally dripping with meaning. And the meaning it carries, cannot be exhausted in language. The water ‘speaks’ at a depth beyond words. But it speaks God, and speaks the saving grace of God, with a magnificent eloquence. It is able to do this because water is already a living expression of the communicative nature of God. It is a creature of God’s Word.

This is what we mean by a sacrament. A sacrament is a solid reality that approaches us saturated with the mystery of grace; of presence; of the love of God, that goes far beyond what our words can utter, and opens horizons of possibility that our speech cannot map. ]

***[G] 3. Forms of the Word of God:***

We need to put a bit of order into all this! Let’s try to get some shape into it.

*Q. What does the phrase ‘the Word of God’ immediately call to mind?—*

*Write up on board.*

[Bible, preaching, Christ, prophecy, the Spirit’s voice to us, the Word that was with God in the beginning, sacrament etc … ]

So ‘Word of God’ is a multidimensional reality. That’s important. If we restrict it to one aspect, say the Bible, we do damage to its complex and interconnected vitality.

*Q. Now can we get a biblical reference to each of these uses of the phrase?*

**(\*IMAGE 6 – Matrix) I’ll let you know when this is to go on screen!**

**1. The eternal Word of God:** ‘The Word was with God and the Word was God…’ Jn 1.1; Heb 1.1 – foundational to all understanding of Word of God/voice of Spirit – God is essentially, that is in God’s-self, *eloquent*. God is community and communicative by nature. The word is the second person of the Trinity.

**2. The creative Word of God:** – ‘Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.’ : Heb 1.1; Jn 1.3; Gen 1-2; Ps 33.6, 9 [We could include here the Sacramental words of God]

**3. The prophetic Word of God:** The phrases ‘the word of Yahweh (the Lord)’ and the ‘the word of Yahweh came to so and so’ appear over 200 times in the OT. This word comes upon the prophet, presses in on him, takes him over, as it were, and then comes to expression in the words and actions the prophet takes, thus shaping lives, community and history. Classic example: ‘Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before your were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them for I am with you to deliver you, say the Lord. Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth.” Jer 1.4-10. Cf Jesus words, Jn 7.16 Contemporary prophets - scientists

**4. The incarnate Word of God:** ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us…’ Jn 1.14. God’s essential eloquence takes up living residence in our human dimension of being in the person of Jesus Christ. For Xn faith JC is the definitive, because incarnate, Word of God. In this strong sense, the Word of God is not a revealed teaching, but a living person, or as NT also says, Life in Person.

**5. The written Word of God –Scripture**: which is originally the written deposit of the spoken, prophetic, preached (NT) word of God. (V central to Protestant faith!). ‘All scripture is inspired by God and is useful …’ 2 Tim 3.16-17.

**6. The spoken (preached) Word of God:** Jesus the preacher – all through the Gospels; Paul the preacher – ‘How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?’ Rom 10.14-17.

**7. The ‘inner’ Word of God:** when the Word spoken enters the heart of the hearer – ‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in al wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.’ Col 3.16\*; James 1.21

[Notes:

a) interconnection of all dimensions of WoG – all are dependent on 1 and all can legitimately claim to give expression to, that is, make concrete in our world, God’s self-utterance –

b) there is a sort of hierarchy (or order of priority) in this catalogue (though I don’t want to make it too strict) and it’s roughly the order in which the dimensions are listed, 1-7. E.g., 7 really depends on 5 and 6. But 4 really has higher priority than 3 and even than 2; though there is a mutually dependence of 4 on 3 and 2 in turn!

c) to listen to WoG requires attention to all dimensions – without this we are in danger of falling into an unbalanced or distorted listening e.g. focus on 7 what I think I hear! Or 4 – Biblicism worship of the letter not the Spirit

d) there is in our current church life, I think, a serious neglect of which one of these? – we tend to specialise in 3-7 of these dimensions. I guess there is an understandable reason for this: these dimensions are the Word in our *human* realm – in Christ the Word become one of us – and the other dimensions all find expression in *human* words.

But 2 – the Word of God in creating – is the prior word of God and the absolute pre-requisite for the dimensions 3-7 – without the Word that calls the world into being there is no Christ, Bible, no proclamation, no faith. We need to honour this and ponder it.

The first Word of God to us is the Word that calls us into being; brings us out of nothingness. That creating Word makes of us creatures of the Creator – our body and being is God’s speech, which gives us being and life. And our first response to that speech, our first hearing of the Word of God, is our coming into being; our being here. Cf.: Nicolas of Cusa (15th Century): ‘To call into being what is not is to communicate being to non-being. To call is thus to create. To share being through communication is to be created.’ And again, ‘Thou speakest by the Word to all things that are and callest into being those that are not. Thou callest them therefore that they might hear thee and, when they hear thee, then they are.’[[5]](#footnote-5)

That is true of all beings. If *anything* is a creature of God, *everything* is a creature of God. One in all in. Everything is a consequence of the creative word of God and everything a solid response to that word. And this creating Word (as St John said) is present continuous. Creation of the world (ourselves included) is not back there in the past only. It is here and now. This is God speaking.

If Christ is the *incarnate* speech of God. If the Bible is the *written* speech of God. And if preaching is the *spoken* speech of God. Then the world (and we ourselves) are the *solid speech* of God; the visible *voice* of the Spirit. ‘To share being through communication is to be created.’ To say that the world has been created is to say God has given the power of being to the world. This is starting to get at what it means to say ‘if we listen to the land we may hear in it the calling of the Eternal Spirit.’]

**Jan:** Send up of the static form of the matrix – where’s the Spirit in that?!

**(\*IMAGE 7 – Richard and Ann’s book cover)**

**(\*IMAGE 8a – Ann’s Picture; 8b Matrix over picture!)**

If we can think of creation, the world around us, as God’s solid speech: H*ow do we pay attention to that seriously?*

**[J] *4. A personal story:***

Some years ago we were lucky enough to be staying at Tathra, which is a small town on the southern coast of NSW about 100 km north of the Victorian border. The name Tathra is derived from an Indigenous word meaning ‘beautiful place’. **(\*IMAGE 9 – Tathra surf)** And it certainly is. Tathra beach is one of those quintessential Australian ocean shore lines. Astonishing blue-green water stretches to a far horizon. Rolling white-capped surf thunders toward the land 24/7. Fine barley-coloured sand stretches northward in a scallop-like curve that seems to go on forever. Dunes are decked with native grasses that creep and grasp and hold the sand in massive piles with their vegetative fingers. Behind them the deep green of coastal banksias and twisting tea-tree crowd right to the edge of the strand. If there is a platonic idea of the beach somewhere, Tathra must surely be close to its intention.

We rented a cottage nestled on the cliff amid the canopy of great eucalypts alive with the calls of kookaburras, galahs, rosellas and bell birds. Through the branches we could see the lines of breaking waves throwing spray from their foaming heads, and hear the song of the surf, that universally recognised signature tune of the Australian ocean beach. It was stunning. However urbanised we have become, a Tathra beach awakens in us something deep. A longing. A hope. A memory, that is visceral. And somehow regenerative.

**(Unshare screen)**

In the evenings we sat on the deck of the house with a glass of red, taking in this enveloping beauty. We were reading the French philosopher/theologian Jean-Louis Chrétien, as one does in such circumstances. This fabulous little book *The Call and the Response*. Chrétien interprets our human experience as a complex series of interlocking calls to which we are invited (perhaps required) to respond. For example, the Discipleship and Education team of BUC invited Graeme and me to devise a study program on ecological issues for the congregation. That came to us as a call. We felt keen to respond. And this session is the nature of our response. But this in turn becomes another call. An invitation to a further response from you. That then ramifies into further calls and further responses, rippling out to who knows where.

Chrétien traces such calls and responses back to their origin; back to the foundational call into being; the call that draws us out of nothingness and precipitates us into life. He interprets that *theologically* as the creative call of God (i.e., number 2 in the list above). All subsequent calls and responses (including ours here this evening) become part of our integrative response to that originating invitation. Our *life* is our response to the call into being as a creature of a loving Creator.

At first we took Chrétien to mean call and response in the *human* realm, in the heart, and in society – i.e., those dimensions of the Word 3-7. But we quickly discovered that he had no intention of being so confined. For Chrétien, the chorus of voices that cries out to us and invites our participation in its collective song is not restricted to human voices. All beings that share this planet with us, according to Chrétien, call out to us and to each other. And require of us a response. A response of attention. Of respect. Of accountability.

In introducing this vision of a communicating world, a speaking world, Chrétien reaches deep into the classic western theological and philosophical tradition. One vivid paragraph leapt off the page as we read on that deck at Tathra. Chrétien quoted St Augustine from book 10 of his *Confessions*. Augustine is famous in this book for his analysis of the soul in its dealings with God, especially through the mystery of memory. But in this particular passage Augustine’s engagement is with the universe, with the earth, and earth’s creatures. **(\*IMAGE 10 – Augustine text. OOPS. \*IMAGE 11a, 11b)**

**[G]** But what is my God? I put my question to the earth. It answered, ‘I am not God’, and all things on earth declared the same. I asked the sea and the chasms of the deep and the living things that creep in them, but they answered, ‘We are not your God. Seek what is above us.’ I spoke to the winds that blow, and the whole air and all that lives in it replied, ‘Anaximenes is wrong. I am not God.’ I asked the sky, the sun, the moon, and the stars, but they told me, ‘Neither are we the God you seek.’ I spoke to all of the things that are about me, all that can be admitted by the door of the senses, and I said, ‘Since you are not my God, tell me about God. Tell me something of my God.’ Clear and loud they answered, ‘God is the One who made us.’ I asked these questions simply by gazing at these things, and their beauty was the answer they gave.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**[J]** Augustine’s interest is theological. ‘What is my God?’ But his conversation is with the E*arth*. ‘I put my question to the earth.’ Not to the Bible, not to a prophet, not to a book of theology, but to the Earth. And lo and behold, Earth answers. Like St Francis many centuries later, Augustine speaks to the elements of the world in which he is immersed, as if they were family. He addresses the sun, moon and stars; he listens to the ocean and its living water-world; to the atmosphere and its restless motions, and to the flying creatures that inhabit it. He calls to ‘all that can be admitted by the door of the senses’. And these things of the Earth respond. They speak. They speak on matters of deep importance. They speak about God. And Augustine hears and responds.

It is common in our times for readers to interpret this passage from Augustine as merely poetic, or merely metaphorical. Augustine doesn’t *really* speak to the sea and the sky, to birds and the fish. And they don’t *really* respond to him in kind. He’s a flowery rhetorician for heaven’s sake. This is figurative language. The passage is really a picturesque way of presenting a theology of creation, nothing more. Chrétien resists this reduction vigorously. And he argues the text likewise resists it. Augustine is quite specific about his method and its outcome. ‘I asked my questions simply by gazing at these things, and their *beauty* was the answer they gave.’ Beauty is the ‘visible voice’ of the world, to use Paul Claudel’s vivid phrase. Or at least it is one part of that visible voice. Remember Hopkin’s ‘grandeur of God’, that flashes out like shining from shook foil. That gathers to greatness like the ooze of oil crushed.

And then we read these remarkable words on that deck looking at Tathra beach through the eucalypts. This is Chrétien one last time. **(\*IMAGE 12 – Chrétien Text)**

If beauty is the very voice of things, the face-to-face encounter through which beauty grips us is not in its essence a speechless contemplation but a *dialogue*. Visible beauty becomes properly visible precisely when it speaks to us and we question it. It must speak to us in order for us to see it as beautiful. Its charm is not a matter of seduction, of fascination, of a paralysing allurement on the part of forms scintillating without word, but instead consists of eloquence and song.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Beauty, the beauty of the world around us, is a call, God’s call. We felt a deep sadness. We have lived so long without paying this kind of attention. How might we begin to hear and respond to its eloquence and song? To God’s eloquence and song?

This will be what we want to explore in more detail in the next few sessions.

**(Unshare screen)**

*Questions or comments?*

**[G] *5. Summing Up:***

Our assumption is that the major issue defining our times is the cry of the Earth, the ecological crisis. In this session we have tried to make a case that for us as disciples of Jesus this means to understand and respond to Earth as *God’s creation* first, and we and all things as God’s *creatures*. Most people in our society do not see the Earth this way at all. But as a community of faith, we have a special contribution to make to the whole.

We have approached this question through the lens of the Word of God/voice of the Spirit. God’s eloquence is all around us in the wonder and beauty of Earth. And also in the Earth’s cry.

We might paraphrase GMH and say: ‘the world is charged with the *language* of God’. Or to put it another way, the world is *sacramental* – the sold speech of God.

We leave you with this final question. What would it mean if we were to say deliberately in our worship at BUC: ‘for *these* words of witness – that is, for the solid words of creation – and for Christ the Word, thanks be to God?’

**Shawn to talk about online option**

**[G] Between now and next session:**

Read Job 38-39- read aloud if possible; wonderful poetry!

Journaling – commitment to write half a page (may like to share it online);

Reflect on the conversation we have had; and/or may have some experience between sessions that arises from the conversations

1. From the first line of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem: *God’s Grandeur* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. George Marshall, *Don’t Even Think About It: why our brains are wired to ignore climate change* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 95-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 2001), Chapter 1, ‘The Dogmatic Location of the Canon’ pp. 9-46, especially at p. 27, italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, II, 1, p. 48. Our translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jean-Louise Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, pp. 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Confessions*, X, 6, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A, Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)