**‘The world is charged with the grandeur of God’**

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

**Conversation 3:**

**‘And they couldn’t even read Eggplant!’: learning to pray in creation**

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

**[J] Invocation**

*Let’s first introduce ourselves briefly. I will call out the names on my screen in turn. Please then say your name and a say something you are grateful for .*

‘The world is charged with the grandeur of God’: being creatures in a threatened creation.

We continue our journey again tonight with a short invocation in which 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 1a– Olive Tree)**

We honour the significance of this beautiful tree in this simple prayer:

**(\*IMAGE 1b - Prayer)** Words on screen:

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God*

***For the presence of this olive tree***

***Thanks be to God***

I will say the first line and we all join in with the response.

**[G] 1. Introduction:**

**(\*IMAGE 2 – Conversation Title)**

We have been engaging in a fair bit of theological reflection in our sessions thus far; in particular, with reflection on the theology of ‘the Word of God’. But theology (‘God-talk’) is not living faith, or not necessarily. And the God-talk of theology is not necessarily the God-talk of faith. *Prayer* is themost fundamental language of faith. And prayer is the heart’s response to God’s approach to us through the whole *matrix* of the Word of God. In this session, we want to explore how particular attention to the *creative Word of God* (dimension 2 of the matrix) can lead to new depths in our practice and understanding of prayer, that is, to new depths in our living response to God and God’s grace and love.

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Søren Kierkegaard was a famous 19th century Danish theologian. He left an extensive journal containing hundreds of entries on an amazing array of topics. One runs as follows:

To validate the right to knowledge, one must venture out in life, out over the sea, and must raise one’s cry to see if God wants to hear it; not remain standing on the beach watching others fight and struggle—only then does knowledge attain real authentication; and truly it is a very different thing to stand on one leg and prove the existence of God, from giving thanks to [God] him on one’s knees.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The knowledge that Kierkegaard has in mind here is knowledge of God. He believes that to be authentic, such knowledge involves a venture of life, not just of mind. Genuine knowledge of God cannot be conducted from the safety of the beach, from the stance of the observer who watches others struggle in the surf, but whose life essentially is not at stake in the waves. Only if we are prepared to plunge in, by which he means to cry out from the soul to God, can we hope to know God. Speaking *about* God is not enough. The first task of faith is to speak *to* God in response (of course) to God’s speaking to us.

How might believing in the *creative* Word of God, God’s solid speech, find expression, not just in our theological thinking, but in our living faith and especially in our understanding and practice of prayer? That is the question for tonight.

The heart of this session will be to introduce two forms of prayer for you to practice if you wish. But first we need to take a little time to set the context for these practices.

In our previous sessions, we have tried to make a case that God speaks in and through creation, the *things* of this world. If the Word of God lies at the source of the creation of all things; all things, however we may otherwise understand and deal with them, *must* in the final analysis manifest (i.e., show forth) their constitution by that Word. Remember Jean-Louis Chrétien’s remark **(\*IMAGE 3 – Quote) .**

‘The world itself is heavy with speech, it calls on speech and on our speech in response, and it calls only by responding itself, already, to the Speech [capital S, i.e., God’s Speech] that created it.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

We have tried to evoke this communicative quality, the Word quality of creation, by reference to:

1. Biblical witness. God’s whirlwind appearance to Job. ‘Are you listening, Job?’
2. The remarkable dialogue of St Augustine with these same Earthly realities. ‘I put my question [i.e., the theological question ‘But who are you my God?’] to the earth. …
3. Our acknowledgement of Country in our worship services: *that if we listen (to the land), we may hear in it the calling of the eternal Spirit.*
4. The sacraments – the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Communion.

But all this isn’t straight forward or immediately obvious. We have been raised in a culture which has a very different view of the world from this. Our cultural context is *not* sympathetic to seeing the world as the creation of God (and hence ourselves and all other beings as the creatures of God). Even less is it inclined to see the world, especially things regarded as ‘inanimate’ and ‘insentient’ (stars, sun, wind, snow, etc.) as ‘communicative’, that is, as having anything remotely to do with language or communicating as we humans understand it.

To bring the things of the world into the matrix of the Word of God, for example: speaking to the sun and moon (Augustine), expecting vultures might speak to us (Job), and listening to the land (Indigenous stance), are attitudes and actions that we might entertain as picturesque ways of giving expression to our aesthetic appreciation of nature. But that is definitely as far as it goes. Anything more is sentimental fantasy.

The philosopher David Hume, writing at the early stages of the development of modern scientific/technical understandings expressed a scepticism we can easily identify with.

**(\*IMAGE 4 – Quote)**

There is an universal tendency amongst mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object those qualities with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious. We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds, and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice and good will to everything that hurts or pleases us. Hence the frequency and beauty of the *prosopopaeia* [personification] in poetry, where trees, mountains, and streams are personified, and the inanimate parts of nature acquire sentiment and passion.

In other and earlier times, lacking any real sense of how the world actually operates, Hume argues, people imagined the world to be like themselves. If the world is thought to resemble us we feel reassured, we know better where we stand and feel more confident about how to act. But those times are well and truly gone. Descartes, Kepler, Galileo, Newton have spoken. And we have heard. Hume is prepared to allow some leeway for poetry as expressive of our human appreciation of nature, provided that it not mistaken for the truth of things as they really are. Yes, it’s nice to have an Augustine express his appreciation of the natural world in the form of an elegant dialogue, but let’s recognize it for what it is: prosopopaeia (i.e., personification). Anything that strays beyond the boundaries of this clear-eyed understanding of reality is an absurdity. Nature is not human and not divine, and to ascribe to it such characteristics is to distort it and thus to undermine any genuine, that is accurate, attempt to know it as it really is.

*Comments and questions*

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**[J] 3. A communicating world? – Why not?**

Having said that our culture is unsympathetic to the idea of the world as God’s visible voice (which, on the whole is true), there are emerging counter trends in imaginative literature, in science and especially in the awakening interest (though shamefully belated) in Indigenous knowledge and ways of being in the world, that run strongly counter to the mainstream. We will briefly consider two. First, a short story by the celebrated fiction writer Ursula Le Guin. And second, a stunning litany of gratitude for the world that comes from the *Onondaga People* of North America.

*a) Ursula Le Guin and the Therolinguists*

Ursula Le Guin is perhaps most famous for her Earthsea series of novels. But she has also written widely on other subjects, including the nature and distribution of language. In a brilliant short story (wave book!) with the astonishing title **(\*IMAGE 5a – Essay Title)**, “The Author of the Acacia Seeds And other Extracts from the *Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics*”, she imagines where the study of language and linguistics may lead us in the coming century.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The story is set at some indeterminate time in the future when any university worth its salt will have a well-established department of ‘therolinguistics’. The prefix ‘thero-‘ means ‘of or pertaining to animals’. Hence therolinguistics **(\*IMAGE 5b)** is the study of the language of animals. Her story presents three extracts from this imagined *Journal of the Association of Therolingistics*.

The first extract is a report from two myrmecologists (i.e., Ant scientists!), whom Le Guin dubs G. D’Arbay and T.R. Bardol (genders unspecified!). This pair report on studies they made of ‘messages’ found in an abandoned anthill ‘written’ via an intricate arrangement of degerminated acacia seeds in a formerly unknown dialect of Ant-talk. Their painstaking deciphering of the message reveals an ominous plot by rebel ants planning the assassination of the Queen and the relocation of the colony to another anthill. A whole dialect, politics, philosophy and poetics of Ant life is revealed. A myrmecophile’s dream come true!

The second extract from the journal is an announcement of an expedition to the Antarctic with the aim of extending human understanding of the literature and dialects of Penguin. In perusing this report we discover much is already known of the choral literature that emanates from the tight knit social life of the Adélie penguin species; and further, that this ornithological literature is best translated in operatic or ballet form, rather than straight prose. But the Emperor penguin and its language remain unstudied, largely due to the extreme location and weather conditions of the bird’s habitat. This expedition aims to fill in that linguistic void.

The leader of the expedition, one D. Petri, speculates about what might be discovered. In contrast to the life of the Adélie penguins, he argues ‘[t]he bonds between the members of an emperor colony are rather personal than social. The emperor is an individualist. Therefore I think it almost certain that the literature of the emperor will be composed by single authors, instead of chorally; and therefore it will be translatable into human speech.’ Warming to his subject, he rebuts critics of his intended research with the words: ‘[L]ike Professor Duby, [an acknowledged guru amongst therolinguists!] my instinct tells me that the beauty of that poetry [i.e., the poetry of the emperors] will be as unearthly as anything we shall ever find on earth.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

The final extract in this imagined journal is an editorial piece by the President of the Theroliguistics Association. She muses on the immense universe of as yet unexplored, undocumented and undeciphered languages, not only in the huge diversity of animal life on earth, but also in the even larger spheres of plant and so-called (perhaps miscalled) ‘inanimate’ things of the planet. ‘Why do therolinguists study only animals?’, she asks. What about plants and rocks and oceans? Do they communicate? Or better, why would we think they *don’t* communicate? No doubt seeking to engage with these wildly different languages will be immensely difficult.

But [she writes] we should not despair. Remember that so late as the mid-twentieth century, most scientists, and many artists, did not believe that even Dolphin would ever be comprehensible to the human brain – or worth comprehending! Let another century pass, and *we* may seem equally laughable. ‘Do you realize,’ the phytolinguists **(\*IMAGE 5c)**  will say [*phyto-* being a prefix meaning ‘of or pertaining to plants] … that they couldn’t even read Eggplant?’ And they will smile at our ignorance, as they pick up their rucksacks and hike on up to read the newly deciphered lyrics of the lichen on the north face of Pike’s Peak.

The President finishes her Editorial with a final speculation. She envisages the emergence of the first *geolinguists* **(\*IMAGE 5d)** who ignore the delicate, transient lyrics of the *lichens* and go on to read beneath them the

wholly atemporal, cold, volcanic poetry of the rocks: each one a word spoken, how long ago, by the earth itself, in the immense solitude, the immenser community, of space.[[5]](#footnote-5)

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Le Guin’s story is a wonderfully imaginative challenge thrown out to our habitual self-centredness. We humans are *the* speaking animals. We alone of all beings in the universe (God’s creation we might prefer to say) have language. Really? says Le Guin. Do you know that? Or do you simply presume that? What if ‘the world itself is heavy with speech’ and calls ‘on our speech in response’? And we believers might add, ‘calls only by responding itself, already, to the Speech [capital S] that created it’?[[6]](#footnote-6) What if that were *true*?

Fantasy fiction has an eerie way of anticipating the future. Ursula Le Guin published her therolinguists story back in 1982. In 2015, the German forest scientist, Peter Wohlleben drew together a huge wealth of recent research into the life of trees. He presents it in this terrific book: *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They feel, How They Communicate*. **(\*IMAGE 6 – Book).** Here are beautiful descriptions of an astonishing world of communication and community, of dependence and interaction, between trees. This goes on all the time, though I, for one, have been utterly oblivious of it. I thought of the tree as the part I could see, trunk and branches, each a separate individual, welcome to my eyes and a source of shade.

Wohlleben leads us into another, almost magical world. His chapters have headings like: **(**\* **SLIDE 7 - a,b,c,d,e:**  ‘Friendships’, ‘The Language of Trees’, ‘Social Security’, ‘Love’, ‘Forest Etiquette’. At first you think he’s got to be exaggerating; surely this is straight *prosopopaeia*, trees as in fairy tales and David Hume. But as you read you discover this is physics, chemistry, biology, thermodynamics. Trees talk. And we can begin to hear and understand them – if we pay the right kind of attention.

Phytolinguistics is not some fanciful distant future discipline dreamed up by Ursula Le Guin. It is today’s reality. Peter Wohlleben and others are practicing it as we sit here. They are reading birch and beech and pine and hemlock. Who knows, but someone, somewhere is already deciphering Eggplant!

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We are not trying to argue that such science somehow validates a theology of the creative Word of God, and hence of the world as the ‘solid speech’ or ‘visible voice’ of God. We don’t know what Peter Wohlleben’s theological leanings might be. But this kind of research (and it is burgeoning in our time) challenges the sealed bell-jar of anthropocentrism in which large sections of our culture remains restrictively stranded.[[7]](#footnote-7) It makes attending to the world about us more as a living community of subjects than simply a huge pile of objects (Thomas Berry) seem a less eccentric undertaking than it might otherwise feel. And that in turn perhaps opens the door at least far enough for us to experiment tentatively with standing before, say, a beautiful tree or creek or animal and whispering softly, ‘for *these* words of witness and for Christ the Word; thanks be to God.’

*Conversation: any comments or questions Use Raise Hands option*

**[J]** *b) Robin Wall Kimmerer and braiding sweet grass*

It is becoming clearer and clearer that the First Nations of this land hold wisdom, knowledge and spiritual connection with the Land, the Water, and the Atmosphere, which powerfully critiques our western knowledge and practice. This calls for our serious attention in a time of ecological emergency. We are going to devote session 6 to an exploration of some of this wisdom, knowledge and spiritual connection.

But as a foretaste, we want to consider at this point an astonishing piece of Indigenous wisdom from North America. We hope you have had the chance to read the essay ‘Allegiance to Gratitude’ which we sent out last time. This is a chapter from a wonderful book by Robin Wall Kimmerer entitled: *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. This is therolinguistics, phytolinguists and geolinguistics at a very sophisticated level!

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a member of the Citizen Potawatomi (Pot-a-wah-toe-mi) Nation, which is part of the Three Fires Confederacy in northeast North America. She is steeped in the ancient learning and spiritual affinity with the Land of her People *and* she is a brilliant botanist trained in the latest research methods of modern western science. She embodies the truth that plants and animals are our oldest teachers. [Remember the word of Job: ‘But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you.’ (Job 12.7-8)] In her book, Kimmerer shows powerfully that the awakening of ecological consciousness, so vital in our time, requires acknowledgement and celebration of our reciprocal relationship with the rest of the living planet. ‘For only when we can hear the languages of other beings are we capable of understanding the generosity of the earth, and learning to give our own gifts in return.’[[8]](#footnote-8)

***[G]*** *Conversation:*

*We are now going into breakout groups for 15 minutes. Please make sure you appoint someone to report back. There will be a warning one minute before the time is up.*

*If there are people who haven’t read the chapter please raise your hand and Tim will put you in a group with Jan and me and we can introduce it to you.*

**(\*IMAGE 8 – Breakout Questions)**

*1. What struck you most about this chapter?*

*2. The text is called the ‘Thanksgiving Address’, or more accurately ‘the Words That Come Before All Else’.*

*What are the implications of declaring these words as the first words of all?*

*– the things that matter most; the foundation of a culture; the statement of identity of self and community.*

*What are our culture’s words that come before all else?*

*– Anthropocentricity: economy, wealth, security, control of earth, technological mastery, consumerism, competition for resources*

*3. What is there for us to learn for our own faith practice? (a) Individually (b) as the community of BUC?*

**Regather and report.** *Tim to call on group leaders for reports from the discussions.*

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**[G] A suggested practice of prayer 1:**

This chapter from Kimmerer’s book is not introducing a *theory* of gratitude toward the Earth. It isclearly a practice. A ritual to be repeated daily, preferably, by a community of like-minded people. Remember the chorus phrase: ‘Now our minds are one.’ Kimmerer says it is not a prayer. But from a Christian perspective, it’s just a whisker away. *Remember Chrétien’s words: ‘we cannot tear ourselves away from the world to offer ourselves to God.’ The Creation is God’s first address to us – the call into being. To greet, to thank, to respect, to love the things of Creation is to greet, thank, respect, love the Creator.*

The thanksgiving itself explicitly expresses this at its climax:

*We now turn our thoughts to the Creator, or Great Spirit, and send greetings and thanks for all the gifts of Creation. Everything we need to live a good life is here on Mother Earth. For all the love that is still around us, we gather our minds together as one and send our choicest words of greeting and thanks to the Creator. Now our minds are one.*

Jan and I have taken up this challenge. For many weeks we have prayed these words aloud with each other every morning as our first words toward God. Then we have kept a period of silence before God in the spiritual ethos created by these words, trusting that the Spirit may make them dwell in our hearts. Then we bring our prayers for the *human* context in which we are placed – family, church, society.

The effect has been striking. We find our whole attitude to the world about us changing. We experience all the aspects of the world reverenced in the prayer – sun, moon, stars, atmosphere, weather, waters, plants, animals and fish – all the same things mentioned in God’s speech to Job – as present to us, enlivened around us, as kin, as connected. The Earth becomes Creation and Creation becomes more what is really is – the solid, loving, communicative first Word of God to us. We cannot *think* ourselves into this reality, we can only be loved into it by the Spirit.

Here then is one practical possibility to consider. Practice this prayer along with your usual prayers to God. And keep a journal of what happens as you go along.

Maybe we could share some of our findings from such a prayer experiment in our FB conversations.

**(\*IMAGE 9a - Title)**

**[J] 4. Paying attention to the Word of God in Creation – a practice of meditative prayer 2**

Now we turn to a second possible practice of prayer. This time by deliberately placing ourselves in the Creation, in the presence of other living beings.

In the time we were in that house in Tathra, reading Chrétien and astonished by Augustine, we began to take seriously the question: ‘Are we being spoken to unawares?’ But how could we even begin to attend differently? To be open to the call of beauty, to a ‘visible voice’?

We decided to stand at the edge of the ocean for half an hour each day, attending (a privilege at this life stage, we know!). Over some years we developed a form of meditative prayer the account of which became our book *On the Edge: A-Way with the Ocean* (wave book), which contains journal entries with reflections. We would like now to introduce the prayer practice to you. There is a small pocket size booklet outlining this practice available (once out of lockdown!), and we will also put it up online.

**(\*IMAGE 9b)**

**Finding a place**

First find a place where you feel a sense of being in the presence of Nature.

For city-dwellers find a place that is as near to a ‘natural’ wild order, as relatively intact an ecosystem, as you can find. For example, a tract of bush remaining in parkland, or the re-vegetated edge of a local creek or pond. But it may be your own created garden, or even simply a single tree or a plant in a pot.

**(\*IMAGE 9c)**

**Approaching**

Once you have chosen a place consider how you will get there. Approach matters. Build in as much silence as you can.

You also need to think about what we call ‘the weather’. Do you need to take a hat, sunscreen, rain jacket, umbrella, gloves etc?

Other people may walk by. Decide ahead simply to attend to the practice. They have their life (and probably dog), you have yours.

**(\*IMAGE 9d)**

**Invoking**

Having arrived, decide where to stand (listen to what is calling you).

Take time to notice what you are hearing, seeing, tasting, feeling, smelling.

Turn to honour each of the four directions (E, N, W, S), and feel the energy of the sun pouring down, and the energy of the earth rising beneath your feet.

Dedicate the practice to the well-being of all of Creation.

**(\*IMAGE 9e)**

**Attending**

Standing (or sitting if necessary)

Push upwards from the top of your head.

At the same time, relax the rest of your body.

Keep your eyes open. Soften your gaze – about a 45 degree angle is good.

Empty your mind. Gently let distracting thoughts pass by as clouds across the sky, and return again to the practice.

**(\*IMAGE 9f)**

**Taking leave**

Make an offering sending the energy of the practice back out into the world.

Walk/drive home silently.

**(\*IMAGE 9g)**

**Journaling**

Write about your experience (e.g. half a page). Keep these pages in a folder – you will be amazed at what you find when you read them later.

We suggest you try out either this practice or the thanksgiving address as part of your regular prayer. Of course, if you already have a prayer practice of attending to Creation then simply keep on. There are many possibilities and your contribution to our conversation will be a gift.

A half hour each day or even twice or once a week would be a way to start. If this is new to you it is really worth persevering, it can feel very strange and you may need to start with 5 minutes and gradually increase the time. Be gentle with yourself.

If you would like, it would be wonderful to post some journals on our FB page.

We gratefully acknowledge teachings from a range of sacred traditions, in particular Taoist and Native American.

**Ending**

Any questions?

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**References:**

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, (Minneapolis, Min.: Milkweed Editions, 2013)

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Jan Morgan & Graeme Garrett, *On the Edge: A-Way with the Ocean*. (Melbourne: Morning Star Publishing, 2018)

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1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Die Tagebücher* (trans. V. H. Gerdes) 1 (1962), 261f (1840), quoted by Gerhard Ebeling in *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens*, Band I, Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1979, p. 193, my translation. Chapter 9 of this work, ‘*Reden zu Gott*’ (pp. 192-244), has been of particular importance in the preparation of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ursula Le Guin, *The Compass Rose*, (Panther Books, 1982), pp.11-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ursula Le Guin, “The Author of the Acacia Seeds And other Extracts from the *Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics*” in *The Compass Rose* (London: Panther Books, 1984), pp. 11-19 at p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid*., p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf., Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, for example, Sarah Abbot, “Approaching Nonhuman Ontologies: Trees, Communication, and Qualitative Inquiry,” in *Quantitative Inquiry*, February ? 2021, pp. 1-13. An extensive bibliography of relevant literature on this type of research is found on pp. 11-13 of this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. From the rear cover of the book, *Braiding Sweet Grass*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)