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

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

**Conversation 4:**

**Having a ‘temple tantrum’: resistance, grief and anger**

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

Welcome to anyone who is new to the group.

**[J] Invocation**

At BUC the olive tree is a central symbol of our life together and a living being among us. Since we are still unable to gather on site in the physical presence of the tree, here it is.

**(\*IMAGE 1a– Olive Tree)**

We honour again 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***

**Shawn’s hymn.** As you probably know from our online conversation, Shawn has created a beautiful song in response to the speech of God to Job. Let’s listen to it together as our opening invocation.

**Play the song, ‘Where were you?’**

We have just prayed to God to help us hear God’s call. Last session we offered two possible forms of prayer in relation to creation. Graeme and I learned from our experience that this prayer can feel strange and difficult. If you have given it a try, and would like to talk about how it was (or wasn’t) for you, we invite you to stay online for a few minutes at the end of our time together tonight. We will have an opportunity to share our thoughts and feelings together. There is no expectation here – this is simply an offer to be taken up if you would like.

**1. Jesus and the money-changers in the Temple**

**(\*Image 2 – Conversation title)**

What happens if we let ourselves plunge into the ocean, instead of standing on the shore? You remember that image of Kierkegaard’s from our last session. ‘To validate the right to knowledge,’ he said, ‘one must venture out in life, out over the sea, … not remain standing on the beach watching others fight and struggle.’ The creation of God – God’s solid speech – which came to Augustine as the call of beauty, in our time comes as an anguished cry. Gerard Manley Hopkins heard the beginnings of this cry long ago. Now it is a rising scream. Tonight we are not so much *thinking* about what our response should be, but trying to name what our deep emotional responses already are. This takes us into difficult, messy territory. Or to use Kierkegaard’s image, plunges us into the boiling surf. We feel the loss of secure footing, the shaking of previously reliable certainties, the immense shock of the truth.

**(\*Unshare screen)**

To give some structure to our journey, we want to introduce two stories. One, a familiar account from the gospel of John of Jesus’ response to the money-changers in His Father’s temple. The second, a novel written by Australian author, Richard Flanagan.

So the Jesus story. If you were present you will certainly remember Ian’s ‘temple tantrum’ sermon (and perhaps the wonderful energy with which the children threw down the coins).

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” (Jn 2.13-16)

Jesus is mad. ‘This is God’s holy place. “My Father’s house”. And just look at what you’re doing!’ His anger spills out because those who have control in the house of the Father are betraying their calling to be custodians of God’s gifts. Their behaviour is systematically destroying what the house of God is intended to be. They are acting in a way diametrically at odds with what God, the ‘inhabitant’ of the house, is and wills.

Ian’s sermon was a wonderful commentary on this story. You remember he illustrated it with the story of the fictitious English soccer club, FC Richmond and its angry captain, Roy King. Here are the concluding moments of that sermon.

**Video clip of sermon – starting at 44’55’’ and finishing at 47’**

The ecological crisis we are facing presses us to expand the vision of God’s sacred dwelling place. God’s temple. Scripture is deeply aware that God is not boxed in, in the sacred spaces we construct. The world, *the creation,* is the true house of God.

Thus says the Lord:

Heaven is my throne

and earth is my footstool;

what is the house that you would build

for me,

and what is my resting place?

All these things my hand has made,

and so all these things are mine,

says the Lord. (Is 66.1-2)

‘All these things’ refers to everything, to the whole. Creation is God’s true dwelling place. Made with God’s own hand. And God’s Spirit inhabits this temple.

But there are money changers now in the temple of creation. Humans beings who control and operate ruthlessly extractive, growth dominated economies, are wreaking havoc with God’s holy dwelling place. Our global marketplace is trashing, not a local sacred place and the worship of its local inhabitants. It is trashing the planet, and disrupting the worship of all creatures, ‘*all these things my hand has made’*, as Isaiah puts it.

Ian reminds us that Jesus says ‘I came that you may have life in all its abundance’. He is angry where the flow of life is blocked, where systems of self-interest and power violate God’s loves and intentions for *all* his holy temple.

Like Jesus, *we* have feelings about what is happening in the temple of God. For my part, I feel a messy, unmanageable, ever changing mix of emotion. I feel grief, I feel anxious, I feel fear, I feel helpless, I feel overwhelmed, resistant, mad . . . and numb. For a start. Not feeling anything at all is a relief. And I flee to this refuge, too. Yet we need to find ways to resist this seduction, this escape, though of course we all need it some of the time.

Can we reach out to each other, to share and to support each other, in the struggles with the waves of emotion that batter the shores of our lives? Is there a way to reach our anger? Our helplessness, our numbness? And perhaps to get in touch with their creative energy? And to let this transform into positive and not destructive action? Keeping in mind Ian’s careful words about anger.

So, here is our challenge. How do we name our times? And how do we deal with the deep responses of our souls to these times?

*Any comment/question*

*We now turn to a powerful novel by Richard Flanagan. The story evokes the dying of an elderly mother in hospital. If this raises any personal issues for you, please feel free to be kind to yourself – leave for a while if you need to.*

**[G] 2. The story of a rising scream**

*It would be good if you had a piece of paper and a pencil handy.*

Richard Flanagan is one of Australia’s finest story tellers. His novels hold the mirror up to us and our society. They reflect who we are; and where we are; and how we are. His latest novel, *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, is a powerful evocation of what it is like to be living in Australia at this climate emergency moment in our (hi)story. Graeme and I read it out loud to each other recently. It was a visceral experience. Even though Flanagan uses the literary technique known as ‘magic realism’, or maybe *because* he uses this form, we found ourselves increasingly and disconcertingly disclosed, and our society powerfully and at times painfully laid out before us. Perhaps some of you have read it also?

Flanagan describes his novel as ‘a rising scream’. And that’s apt. It is a fierce, utterly clear-eyed exploration of the world in which we now find ourselves. Set in Tasmania at the height of the terrible fires that ravaged huge tracts of Eastern Australia in the summer of 2019-2020, the book tries to bring to speech – not in the technicalities of science or the platitudes of politics, but in the common language of ordinary people – the catastrophe, so much of our own making, in which we, and all other creatures with us in this land, are now living – and dying.

That’s no easy task. How can you put into words the incinerating town of Mallacoota, her inhabitants huddled on the beach under a blackened sky raining fire? What do you say about a billion creatures, wild and domestic, turned to soot? What *do* you say? Climate change pushes language to breaking point. We feel it. And Flanagan’s book opens with this struggle to find words. Sentences on the page break down in full flight. Words pile up against each other, twisted somehow for being asked to carry too much. And yet he is determined to find the words to say it; to build a bulwark against the rising tide of what we might call *Trumpspeak*, where (to quote Flanagan) ‘everyone [is] using words to avoid using words for what words were used for’ (235), that is to tell the truth. But one thing is clear in our smoky times. The truth is hard to hear.

The megaphone Flanagan chooses to make his raid against our deafness comes in the form of a family of four, reluctantly drawn together in a ward of a Hobart hospital. Francie, the mother, has suffered a brain bleed. Already in her mid-eighties, the medical advice is to let nature take its course. The family can ease Francie’s final journey with expert palliative care. Tommy, the eldest son, an unsuccessful artist with a tendency to stutter – but to this point his mother’s constant carer – agrees. Let her die with dignity. Tommy’s stuttering is a personal affliction, of course. But it is also a vivid expression of our public dilemma. Everyone from the Prime Minister down finds it hard to say clearly and truthfully what needs to be said.

Terzo, the youngest of the three, a venture capitalist back from his business on the mainland, won’t hear of it. Francie’s not going to die on his watch! Anna, the middle child, a highly successful architect living in Sydney, goes along. She and Terzo have money and power. And they intend to use it for good. Francie is delivered to the surgeons. From there the story unfolds as the full force of modern medical technology is brought to bear against their mother’s encroaching demise; and against her express wish ‘to let me go’

The tensions, spoken and unspoken, of the human drama that unfolds in Francie’s hospital room – and there are plenty of them! – play out against a massive cosmic backdrop of Tasmania’s ancient forests and grasslands ablaze – oppressive and omnipresent, yet, in the air-conditioning of the sick ward, somehow just out of focus for the feuding siblings.

Central to Flanagan’s concern is what he calls ‘the vanishing’. [Remember that word, its crucial.]. In the human realm this manifests as a ‘silent leprosy’ (as he calls it, p. 47) in which parts that belong to the human body – Anna’s body mainly –suddenly aren’t there anymore. Anna first notices that the fourth finger on one hand is missing. This is followed by a knee, another finger, a breast and an eye. The worst of it is that by and large nobody notices, not even medical practitioners. Anna herself is strangely indifferent. (This is what commentators tend to call the literary technique of ‘magic realism’. Something which in real life doesn’t happen – vanishing body parts – and yet in the telling of the story *does* happen, and *feels* real as you read.)

There is one other character we need to mention, who appears briefly toward the end. Though not portrayed with the detail of Anna or Tommy, her presence is weighted with significance. Her name is Lisa Shahn, a scientist who runs a government program to save the orange-bellied parrot, one of Australia’s most critically endangered species. Anna, seated next to her on a plane flight home from Hobart, finds herself unexpectedly resonating with Lisa’s description of these tiny birds flying across hundreds of kilometres of wild sea, returning to their birthplace to breed in the Tasmanian wilderness.

Surprising herself, Anna becomes one of the volunteers who check the nesting boxes of the parrots in an isolated rain forest deep in the Southern Mountains of Tasmania. But in the process of this strenuous work, Anna suffers a heart attack and dies in the middle of this extraordinary wilderness. Lisa Shahn arrives at the site later and finds her body. But Anna, so unlike her mother, Francie, in that technologically sophisticated hospital ward, dies a natural death, doing something she believes in, and in the midst of great natural beauty enveloping her.

The ornithologist, Lisa, picks up her work again, checking the bird boxes one by one, but finds them all empty. Until the moment she peers into the darkness of a hide and sees two tiny black eyes, ‘brilliant as balls of dropped ink’, staring back at her. Excited and astounded, she clambers down the ladder from the perch high in the canopy, and without thinking or deciding anything, falls to her knees sinking gently in the soft damp of the understorey. A sort of epiphany at the climax of the story. A moment of immense gift and immense gratitude, filled not with defeat, but with expectant waiting.

A flinty harshness stalks the pages of this book. Flanagan uses words for what words used to be used for: to show us ourselves and the global context we have engineered with our money, power and technology. It’s not flattering. But neither is it judgmental, cruel or cynical. This book is a lament arising from love of the Earth and passionate hope for her future and the future of our human place within it. It reminds me of Jesus in the temple.

*Comments and questions*

Readings:

**[G]** Such a quick overview doesn’t do justice to a book of immense power. We hope you might choose to read it yourself. But what we can do now is give you a taste of the novel itself. Four short extracts. Just let yourself enter the story, listening with your ear attuned to what is being said.

*As we listen to these readings keep in mind the idea of the temple, God’s dwelling place, and of Jesus’ temple tantrum. Theologically considered, Flanagan’s story is the story of human action undertaken in the temple of creation.*

**Reading 1:** This piece comes right near the start of the story. The eldest son, Tommy, is speaking and thinking (you’re sometimes not s*u*re which). He’s addressing his sister Anna, though he’s also talking to himself. Compared to Anna, the architect, and brother, Terzo, the venture capitalist, Tommy’s pretty much a failure. But he cares deeply for his mother’s plight. He feels the troubles brewing in the family and in the world around them, like a ‘growing scream’ inside. The pressure gets to him and he stutters. He can’t get out what he wants to say clearly. That language problem – how *do* you say it – is for Flanagan, very much a characteristic we all face in our current situation.

Caution: there is some coarse language in this passage!

Read pp 4-7 (6 min) ‘For such a long time . . . you can’t stop hearing you know?’

*Exercise*

Note your responses on your piece of paper – What strikes you? What are you feeling?

**(\*Image 3a,b,c,d – summary)**

* The human world – human domination of the world, building, tourism, travel, the digital universe, spreading everywhere across the globe: ‘even here at the end of the world .. queuing at the top of Everest’ (4). Consumerism rampant – at any cost – jail for protesting coalmines. The world is getting ‘hotter, smokier, noisier’ (4)
* The other-than-human world – pushed out, used for human amusement (penguins), wild birds vomiting supermarket shopping bags’ (6), above all ‘the vanishing’ – extinction of species- gone, gone, gone; or going, going, going.
* Anthropocentrism now seriously out of balance; the more of the human the less of the other-than-human. Pollution
* Something badly wrong – ‘he felt it as a pain as a sickness growing within him’ (7) – but basically it is ignored, silenced, pushed away. *Do we feel something like this pain/sickness?*

**(\*Unshare screen)**

**[J] Reading 2:** We are now deep into the story. Francie, the aged mother, now hospitalised for weeks, is subjected to increasingly elaborate medical intervention intended to keep her body alive, against her wishes and against the ever deepening shadow of approaching death. The three siblings are in her air-conditioned hospital room, debating with each other and with the doctors about what to do next. Anna wants out of it. But doesn’t know how. She pretends her phone is vibrating. Staring at the screen she says ‘it’s urgent’, work calling. But in fact she goes into a reverie about what’s happening *outside* in the smoke filled world beyond the hospital.

Read pp 94-95 ( 4 min +) ‘Anna felt for her phone … made any difference.’

*Exercise*

Note your responses on your piece of paper – What strikes you? What are you feeling?

**(\*Image 4a,b,c,d,e – summary)**

* The parallel between two ailing mothers: mother Francie and Mother Earth. Both dying in ways that run counter to their wishes, medical technology in Francie’s case; climate change in the case of Earth.
* The pressure on both mothers stem from the same basic causes – money, power, technology and the human desire to control and bend nature to our purposes.
* The approach seems ‘immensely crude’ (95) to Anna. But what could be done about it ‘she had no idea’ (95).
* Ultimately the forces of nature, in death and in planetary climate, are beyond human control and despite our ‘arrogant defiance’ we need to discover ‘an admission of humility’. Humans are not the measure of everything. The looming issue of techno-fixes on a global scale.
* The escape into the virtual world as a way of avoiding the actual world.

**(\*Unshare screen)**

**[J] Reading 3:** We are now nearing the end of the story. In this passage, we meet the ‘magic realism’ we noted earlier; the issue Flanagan calls ‘the vanishing’. Anna notices that parts of her body and her son’s body, and others’ bodies, are slowly disappearing. Just vanishing. It’s not painful. It’s not even very inconvenient. Things seem to go on more or less as they have, but now without these parts. The worst thing is that nobody notices, or if they do, they studiously ignore it.

Magic realism is a literary technique. Koalas are disappearing. But we don’t necessarily experience that as a loss of a part of *our* identity and being. Flanagan is trying to find a way to open us to a profound truth. Piece by piece humanity is being dismantled in parallel and in lock step with the dismantling of the other-than-human-world in which we are embedded. Our time is time of a double vanishing. Vanishing of nature and vanishing of the human. And we are engineering both.

This is subtle. Don’t try to think about it too much. For now, just enter the story.

[A person called ‘Meg’ appears briefly in this passage. Meg is Anna’s lover, but not a major force in the story as a whole.]

This is Anna reflecting on things:

Read pp 231-233 (3 min 20 sec) ‘Life went on … avoid a conversation over happening.’

*Exercise*

Note your responses on your piece of paper – What strikes you? What are you feeling?

**(\*Image 5a,b,c,d – summary)**

* Our modern consumer driven life in cities rolls on ‘so many things to be bought and sold’ (232) even when other life (in the family or in nature) stopped ‘or just grew too grotesque and terrifying to contemplate.’ (232)
* the vanishings are not noticed; or worse, if they are, they are ‘a small story buried in some alternative news feed’ or dismissed as ‘the province of cranks’ (232). What is really desperately abnormal is normalised, rationalised, or dismissed. ‘Everything wrong was now common sense’ (232).
* The ‘wicked problem’ that mustn’t be talked about; Anna struggles to listen to what cannot be said; but ‘each person talked ever more insistently to avoid the possibility of a conversation ever happening’ (233).
* What is this magic realism technique saying to us?

**(\*Unshare screen)**

**[G] Reading 4:** We are now at the end of the story. Francie has died in the Hobart hospital room, finally uncoupled, at Tommy’s request, from all that infernal machinery. Anna has died in the Tasmanian wilderness seeking to do something to stem the rising tide of the vanishings. An instantaneous death, the doctors said. Anna ‘would not have known a thing (280).

In this passage, Lisa Shahn, the ornithologist, is making a last round of her beloved orange-bellied parrots’ hideouts.

Read pp 280-282 (3 min). ‘Lisa Shahn pulled her gaze … not defeated.’

*Exercise*

Note your responses on your piece of paper – What strikes you? What are you feeling?

**(\*Image 6a,b,c,d – summary)**

* In the human realm, the contrast between the deaths of mother and daughter – one drawn out, hospitalised, manipulated, technologized; the other quick, natural, surrounded by the sustaining and life generating Earth
* In the more-than-human realm, the unexpected reappearance of the orange-bellied parrot, nesting. ‘the world seemed, for no apparent reason, suddenly extraordinarily alive’ (281). Lisa ‘was at that moment aware of everything’ (281).
* The moment of adoration: connection not separation; gift not greed, gratitude not manipulation. *Beauty says adieu*! ‘She was, she realised with amazement, not downcast nor defeated’ (282).

**(\*Unshare screen)**

**3. Breakout rooms.** 7 minutes with one minute warning. This time we don’t need to appoint a person to report back.

**(\*Image 7 – questions for groups)**

*What do I feel about all this?*

*What might this be saying for our community life at BUC?*

**(\*Unshare screen)**

**Regather and report** –not calling on each group in turn, just leave it open for any individual to share.

**[J] 4. Ending**

Being creatures in a threatened Creation – tonight we have been attending to our felt experience of this situation. We discover a range of emotions within – distress, anxiety, helplessness. We are afraid, in denial, numb. We are grieving, even angry.

We will post a link online to a helpful paper put out by *Psychology for a Safe Climate* called “Coping with climate change distress”.

The OT scholar Walter Brueggemann shines a light on the biblical prophetic tradition that is particularly pertinent in our time. Jesus in the temple embodies the very core of the prophetic tradition. He is deeply distressed – but his anger is not detached from afar. It comes from a place alongside, from a place of compassion. A love that takes form in anger and grief. For Brueggemann grief is a fundamental component of the prophetic tradition, and needs to be honoured and lived. Grief is radical criticism, and it is grief that breaks through numbness, making way for the birth of newness.

As with Jesus, we live in a time when a whole system needs to be overturned. The status quo is threatening the very temple of God’s Creation. The prophets appear in times where injustice is rife, and deception the order of the day. Truth-telling becomes an imperative. To our minds, Richard Flanagan belongs in this on-going prophetic tradition. Tonight we have tried to speak our truth, to push back against the illusory world our leaders are desperate to keep in place. We often hear the phrase ‘speaking truth to power’. We have been trying to speak truth to ourselves. For we in this situation are power.

How as Brunswick Uniting Church might we support each other to speak truth? We have tried to face that we might be living on both sides of the money-changers’ tables. Can we grieve together intentionally? Could we allow our anger to be transformative? To keep listening to the Spirit and be lead to fresh ways of acting?

We are aware that there is risk in opening our vulnerability in this way in a zoom conversation. However, we want to trust the power of community and hope you have felt a sense of solidarity with kindred souls tonight. And encourage you to continue sharing on FB or by email. Graeme and I are willing to talk with anyone who would like to process further what is happening for them. Just send us an email and we can arrange a time with one of us.

*Jan Morgan and Graeme Garrett*

*Brunswick Uniting Church*

*7 September 2021*