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

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

**Conversation 5:**

**Mother Earth: the slaughter of Tiamat and the recovery of the sacred feminine**

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

Welcome to anyone who is new to the group.

Richard will take a few minutes at the end to raise a suggestion with the group

Jan and Graeme will stay around at the end if anyone wants to talk for a bit

**[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***

**(\*Unshare screen)**

**1. Introduction:**

By now, it is abundantly clear that we need to change our ways. In our last session we confronted some of the enormity of this need, and of the heavy feelings it evokes. We need to be transformed, but how? We more or less know what we want to leave behind, but what do we need to move towards?

Two areas in our common life stand out as offering genuine guidance in these circumstances. Tonight, we want to attend to the transformative power of the *sacred feminine*. Next time we will turn to Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Both traditions remain strongly contested. That very fact should alert us to the presence of entrenched resistance that fears the consequences of deep structural changes.

One significant image that perceptive commentators use to interpret our turbulent times is that of *birth*. Humanity is now undergoing the travail of being *birthed* into a new way of dwelling in the Earth. Either we will assent to this birthing; choose to participate in the formation of a new way of living and acting which promotes life for the planet. Or we will resist it; try to maintain our old ways, and bring further destruction upon the Earth. Believers cannot help but be reminded of Jesus’ words to Nicodemus: ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew.’ (Jn 3.3)

But the maternity ward is no place for wimps. Giving birth is a tough process as every mother knows. **(\*IMAGE 2 – Title)** We called this conversation, ‘Mother Earth: the slaughter of Tiamat and the recovery of the sacred feminine’. This proved to be the most difficult of the themes we have raised. Behind what we have to present tonight, lies a pile of abandoned drafts in the WPB. And we might well discover this one needs to go the same way! But hopefully, with your help, we might find a few steps we can take together.

‘Mother Earth’ is an ancient phrase. Its roots reach into deep time. Occasionally, it still crops up in brand names of shops selling sustainable produce, or in news reports of cyclones, floods and fires where it might be said ‘Mother Earth (or Mother Nature) is angry’. But what is the significance of this ancient description, ‘*Mother* Earth or *Mother* Nature’? And what happened that it has almost disappeared from our consciousness?

By ‘recovery of the sacred feminine’ we mean to point to the massive efforts, mainly driven by women, to reimagine, not merely the place of women in society, work, church, language, sexuality and so on, but to recapture, revision and respect the feminine dimension of the *divine*. If God can be called, ‘Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth’, surely God must also be called, ‘Mother Almighty, birth-giver of heaven and earth’. If God truly is creator, both masculine and feminine realities *must* be rooted in God. And if one image, Father, is an appropriate guide to our relationship with God, the other image, Mother, must likewise be appropriate.

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We don’t imagining anyone here needs convincing of the critique of patriarchy. Though we are painfully aware that such critique it is still urgently needed! Our Federal Parliament’s response to Brittany Higgins, and the entrenched injustice and violence against women, which that whole sorry business exposed, is a vivid case in point. The church, too, has a mixed report card. The largest Christian communion in the world, the Roman Catholic Church, in its recent revision of canon law, took some steps towards greater inclusion of women, but made very clear that the ordination of women to the priesthood is not even on the table.

Fortunately, the recovery of the sacred feminine has been well underway in the Uniting Church for decades. Our Church was among the first in Australia to ordain women and now has women in leadership roles across a wide range of positions. Consistent efforts have been made to change sexist language in scripture, liturgy, hymns, Synod discussions and the whole theological curriculum. Here at BUC there is much to celebrate too. We might spend a few moments doing just that.

**Group conversation**

*What comes to mind?*

**[G]** We want now to introduce two stories, one arising from our own culture in the here and now, the other reaching back into the deep human history from which our culture emerged. The first is very much a story in which the masculine principal is on display; the second, in sharp contrast, a story where the feminine principal is prominent.

**2. A patriarchal drama: a lump of coal in the halls of power**

Remember in session three we explored Robin Wall Kimmerer’s discussion of the Thanksgiving Address of the Onondaga Nation of North America. A magnificent prayer of gratitude which is headed, ‘The Words That Come Before All Else’. This is what the prayer says about Mother Earth:

**(\*IMAGE 3 – Thanksgiving)** *We are thankful to our Mother the Earth, for she gives us everything that we need for life. She supports our feet as we walk about upon her. It gives us joy that she still continues to care for us, just as she has from the beginning of time. To our Mother, we send thanksgivings, love, and respect. Now our minds are one.*

What might be the words our culture would utter about the earth; words that would count as *our* words ‘that come before all else’?

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We are going to watch a video clip of a notorious happening in Federal Parliament on 8th February 2017. The then treasurer, now PM, Scott Morrison brandished a lump of coal in the House of Reps in an impassioned speech in support of coal-fired electricity generation and against the suggestion that we urgently need to reduce our dependence on the burning of this material for the sake of the Planet and future generations.

With the words of the thanksgiving prayer in mind, let us watch this event, looking at it (a) from the perspective of our theology of creation; then (b) what a feminist perspective on the event might wish to say?

**Video Clip:** Show video clip. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ea5bOaPkZpc> Run video from start to 2’45’’ then stop.

**(\*IMAGE 4 – Breakout questions)**

**\*Breakout Rooms –** appoint someone to report back

*1. What attitudes are on display here:*

*(a) toward Nature*

*(b) toward those critical of current energy policies?*

*2. In relation to the earth (symbolised by the coal) what are the words that come before all else here?*

**(\*Unshare screen)**

**Reporting back to whole group –** Tim to coordinate

**(\*IMAGE 5 – Title)[J] 3. The sacred feminine**

I am walking along High Street, thirty years ago, High Street, Armadale. Past shop windows displaying gorgeous rich colours of Turkish carpet rugs, expensive handbags and shoes, elegant picture framing. My reflection in shining glass windows though is of a lonely, sad woman. Even though I have just had breakfast with my beloved sister, I am feeling bleak, disconnected, deeply unsettled.

**(\*Unshare screen)**

Out of the corner of my eye I notice a book shop coming up. I stop, gaze at the titles but feel I can’t enter any of these worlds. Through the open doorway I see a table covered with books, and a sign ‘reduced’. I walk in. What am I doing? Money is in very short supply right now. One of the books has the title *The Civilization of the Goddess*. ‘Goddess’ is not a word I use or even like. My only associations are with a shallow form of what we have called New Age movements. It is a large, thick book of some 500 pages. When I look inside, I see it is filled with very precise detailed maps of archaeological digs at sites in what I learn is called Old Europe.

The maps accompany hundreds of ink drawings and photographs of artefacts that have been unearthed, and carbon dated. I am mesmerised. Many are small figurines, female in form, etched with signs of waters flowing, or birds, serpents, trees, grain, fish. I feel my heart beating. Something is calling, calling. I am a feminist but this is touching a place inside me for which I have no words. The civilization of the goddess - what can this mean?

I can’t afford it. No way. I slowly put the book back down (under some other books to hide it away) and walk out of the shop, back along High Street, my legs resisting all the way. I stop. I turn around. I walk back to the shop and spend another half hour browsing these magnetic pages. I walk out again. What if someone else buys it? I walk back, pick up the book resolutely and take it to the counter. What is going on? Marija Gimbutas is an archaeologist and mytho-archaeologist whose work is documented in this book. Her findings have inspired many artists and novelists to imaginatively re-create a lost and very different world – a world where the divine and the feminine and Earth were all one interconnected whole.[[1]](#footnote-1) For those of us with European ancestry, this is where our ancestors lived. These are tiny glimpses, fragments of *our* deep story.

Learning about these ancestors in deep time, has been a long and transformative journey, leading **(\*IMAGE 6 – Book cover)** me to this really astonishing book, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*, first published in 1991. It is written by Oxbridge scholars and Jungian analysts, Anne Baring and Jules Cashford [show photos?]. Their attempt to recover the sacred feminine turns out to be grounded in an ocean of time that is at least 40,000 years deep. Drawing on a hugely impressive range of art, mythology, poetry, literature, and especially the stunning contemporary discoveries of archaeologists, they present in fascinating detail an ancient and powerful creation story of a Great Mother Goddess, whose presence saturated the lives of human beings across widespread areas of what we now call Europe, the Near East, Asia and Africa, in other words, the very cradle of our *own* civilization and culture.

**(\*Unshare screen)**

Indications of this story, in one or other variation, are found to prevail from Palaeolithic and Neolithic times (i.e., from 40,000 to 10,000 years ago), through the Bronze and Iron Ages (5000 to 3000 years ago). This archaeology provides us with a window into the way our ancestors, across vast stretches of time and wide geographical spaces, have understood and imagined their relationship with the world, with nature, and with the sacred.

Drastically summarising an intricately nuanced story, a picture emerges of a divine being who alone gives birth to the world from her own body. All creatures are her children, including gods. *Everything* (and every *thing*) is part of her living substance, animated with soul and, because of this origin, sacred. There is no separation between mind and matter, spirit and nature, soul and body. Nature and humanity thus share a common originating identity.[[[2]](#footnote-2)](file:///C:\Users\Jan\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\INetCache\Content.Outlook\Q7B4BE5Z\Session%205.2.docx#_ftn6) In Baring and Cashford’s words,

The Mother Goddess, wherever she is found, is an image that inspires and focuses a perception of the universe as an organic, alive and sacred whole, in which humanity, the Earth and all life on Earth participate as ‘her children’. Everything is woven together in one cosmic web, where all orders of manifest and unmanifest life are related, because all share in the sanctity of the original source.[[3]](#footnote-3)

So what happened? How did an imagination and way of life shaped by the sacred feminine disintegrate to the point where the Great Mother Goddess has been almost completely replaced by the Great Father God? How did this radical change come about? It turns out to be a long and complex story. Baring and Cashford take 750 pages to tell it! They document the ways the Mother Goddess underwent many changes of name as cultures and civilisations flourished and collapsed across those many thousands of years. Tiamat is one of these names. Tiamat is a great mythological figure who gathered around her the images and associations of earlier manifestations of the Goddess.

**Group Conversation –** reactions to this material and the pre-reading – Ian to coordinate.

*The Slaughter of Tiamat* is an ancient story that appears at a pivotal moment in the history of western culture. It ‘offers the earliest evidence we have of a complete reversal of the mythology of the earlier era.’[[4]](#footnote-4) The version of the reversal story we are going to explore appears in poetic form in the tablets of Assurbanipal, the last king of Assyria, who died in 631 BCE.[[5]](#footnote-5) But the poetry on the tablets dates from one thousand years earlier in the Hammurabi dynasty of Babylonia around 1750 BCE (predating the exodus).[[6]](#footnote-6) The whole text is a creation story that tells of the calling into being of the gods - the primal pair, whose names are Apsu and Tiamat. Conflict arises between the older and younger generations. The younger gods appoint ‘Marduk the magnificent’ as leader, giving him sceptre and throne, ring and thunderbolt.

*Slide of text*

This is only part of the story, but an absolutely critical part. (The ‘lord’ here in the poem is Marduk.)

Warning: the following text contains some violent images

**(\*IMAGE 7a – Tiamat poem)**

The lord spread out his net to enfold her,

The Evil Wind, which followed behind, he let loose in her face.

When Tiamat opened her mouth to consume him,

He drove in the Evil Wind that she close not her lips.

As the fierce winds charged her belly,

Her body was distended and her mouth was wide open.

He released the arrow, it tore her belly,

It cut through her insides, splitting the heart.

Having thus subdued her, he extinguished her life.

He cast down her carcass to stand upon it.

**(\*IMAGE 7b – Tiamat poem)**

The lord trod on the legs of Tiamat,

With his unsparing mace he crushed her skull.

When the arteries of her blood he had severed,

The North Wind bore it to places undisclosed.

On seeing this, his fathers were joyful and jubilant,

They brought gifts of homage to him.

Then the lord paused to view her dead body,

That he might divide the monster and do artful works.

He split her like a shellfish into two parts:

Half of her he set up and ceiled it as sky . . .

(The other half of the carcass he made into Earth)

He heaped up a mountain over Tiamat’s head,

pierced her eyes to form the sources of the Tigris and Euphrates,

and heaped similar mountains over her dugs,

which he pierced to make the rivers . . .[[7]](#footnote-7)

**(\*Unshare screen)**

The violence of this story is breathtaking. The lord Marduk spreads out a net as a trap, calls up winds to do his will, has weapons at the ready, arrows and mace. He entraps, subdues, attacks, tears and kills, and then stands on the carcass of Tiamat, treading on her legs, crushing her skull, severing her arteries. The fathers (that is, the male aspect of the divine) are jubilant and reward him. He surveys his accomplishment. This Mother, now named as ‘the monster’, he proceeds to split in two ‘like a shellfish’. From these two parts he makes heaven and then earth.

This story spread right across the ancient world even though less ferocious creation stories were also available. Joseph Campbell calls it ‘The Great Reversal’. It represents a radical shift away from feminine sacred images and stories of Creation, toward male dominated alternatives. Rather than the source of all life and order, the primordial Mother Goddess is now portrayed as threatening, evil and needing to be destroyed. The ‘god becomes the *maker* of heaven and earth, whereas the goddess *was* heaven and earth’.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Group conversation –** Ian to lead the discussion

**[G] 4. Recovering the sacred feminine**

The juxtaposition of these two stories, one ancient and one modern, throws a flood of light on our contemporary predicament and guides us towards some of the ways we need to change.

Marduk slays Tiamat. This story lies buried deep in the evolution of our culture. Looking back from our vantage point now, we can see it as a hinge moment in our history. Humanity’s gradual withdrawal from living participation in nature, and the corresponding emptying of animate life from nature, comes to a climax in the slaughter of Tiamat. The sacred masculine violently displaces the sacred feminine. And an agenda is set for the next 4,000 years.

We are living its consequences now. A kind of second slaughter of Tiamat is underway. The life of Earth, ‘Mother Earth’ if we are willing to use that ancient description, is now seriously threatened, by us. The latest IPCC report could be read as our ring-side commentary on the progress of the attack, as the words of the Hammurabi poem were commentary on the original subjugation.

He released the arrow, it tore her belly,

It cut through her insides, splitting the heart.

Having thus subdued her, he extinguished her life.

He cast down her carcass to stand upon it.

It is this deep myth that gives the drama of Scott Morrison, brandishing his lump of coal in the House of Reps, its ominous power. Parliamentary tradition decrees that props are not allowed in House debates. Words are the sanctioned medium. But Morrison smuggles the coal in. Clearly he wants it there for its dramatic impact. He doesn’t smuggle in a chart, or a poster, or a photograph. He smuggles a piece of nature. Concentrated carbon, millions of years old, and dense with almost magic economic power. Energy, which we want and need. Morrison is determined to bring it here, because the House of Representatives is the centre of *human* power. The place where human interests, especially the interests of powerful men, are front and centre. Human power meets nature’s power. And the drama is intended to show who’s boss. Father Morrison has Mother Nature in the palm of his hand. Exactly where he wants her. With voice and gesture, he exudes a sense of control. He will force the Mother to do his will, come what may. Coal, wind, sun, tides, geothermal etc., Morrison has no fear of ‘any of these sources of energy’. They exist as a standing resource for human exploitation. If there is a ‘kick back’ from this ‘Mother’, in the form of climate change, we’ll master that too with our technologies. Morrison gives dramatic voice to the words, which for our culture, come before all else.

We are not pretending that the culture of the Goddess is some lost paradise to which we should return. Baring and Cashford argue that our ancient ancestors probably needed to separate at some point from too close an identification with nature. And there is no doubt that the Patriarchal societies that followed the great reversal have brought many wonderful benefits to humanity, modern science and technology among them. But the point Baring and Cashford make, and we are following, is that we moderns are in a completely different historical moment. The human struggle to gain distance from the forces of nature in order to achieve greater control over the threatening uncertainties of life, has in recent times widened to become a terrible and dangerous dissociation. The balance of power has shifted dramatically. Job could do nothing to influence the weather or alter the bounds of the ocean. We can. Marduk’s slaughter of Tiamat is the classic story that helps us see that change for what it is. The sacred feminine is subjugated to the sacred masculine. And in that subjugation, important truths and realties are lost from view. Profound experiences lived from the energy of a great feminine vision are devalued and dissipated.

We are again at a hinge point in history. To go on as we are is to court disaster. We need to change. One aspect of the change needed, we are suggesting, is to retrieve something of the vision, disposition and action that the sacred feminine embodies. And this is possible. For, like Indigenous Sovereignty in Australia, the great truths of the sacred feminine, though subjugated, were never ceded and never extinguished. And again, like Indigenous rights in Australia, those truths of the sacred feminine are once again emerging strongly. They are all around us, and within us. We know them at BUC.

Our task is not to enact a mythic Marduk verses Tiamat reversal. That’s not possible. And it is not desirable. We’ve suffered enough from the imbalance between the two. Our task is to recover a *balance* between the sacred feminine and the sacred masculine. If the anguish of our times can be understood and undergone as the pains of a new birth of humanity, then part of what that new birth is about is a re-honouring of the sacred feminine in our lives.

**[J] 5. Ultrasound images**

This implies a major shift. It touches and transforms everything. And, like any birth, it takes time and involves labour. We can only give the briefest of sketches of what this might look like. If we are to get anywhere worthwhile with it, we will need to work on this together, as a society and as a church.

Birthing always involves a two-fold movement. A push and a pull. A push away from the former situation which once nurtured life, but now constricts and threatens it. And a pull towards a new and broader place, where the pulses, the sensitivities, the sparks of a new creation can be tended and attended.

We face two parallel tasks – to resist the story of mastery – the enacting of violence towards Earth and women (that’s the push), and to recover what has been lost in the subjugation of the sacred feminine (that’s the pull). In trying to do this, we acknowledge with gratitude the courageous dedication of those pioneers who have lead the way in feminist and eco-feminist critique and reconstruction. Possible glimpses of what could come to birth:

**(\*IMAGE 8a – Possible glimpses)**

**(IMAGE 8b – God)** *God*:

Our Christian tradition has predominantly depicted God as creator, using the images of speech and making. God speaks and calls creation from nothingness into being. This is a brilliant and versatile interpretation. And we have spent a good deal of time exploring its implication in these sessions. But it has its limits. It tends to see God as separate from the creation; acting upon it from outside. The recovery of feminine images of God, especially God as Mother who births creation from her womb, offers us a radically different way of seeing and experiencing the world. Creator and creature relate like mother and child, rather than poet and poem. The same life force joins them and is expressed in and through them. The sacredness of the source interfuses (to use Wordsworth’s expression) the whole. Everything has intrinsic dignity and everything has value because everything shares the holiness of its birth Mother.

**(IMAGE 8c – Earth)** *Earth*:

Speaking and making images of creation tend to drift toward a separation of spirit and matter. The important thing is spirit, word, idea. Matter tends to becomes a sort of lifeless backdrop upon which the drama of spirit plays out. Human beings (bearers of spirit) are set over against (insentient) matter. This separation finds expression, on the one hand, in the subjugation of the other-than-human world to the will and desire of humans. And, on the other, to the kind of a spirituality that seeks God ‘beyond’ the world in the realm of transcendent Spirit.

The recovery of the sacred feminine resists the separation of matter and spirit, with its corresponding denigration of Earth as dead stuff, resource or object over which we exercise our mastery. Both matter and spirit are born from the Mother’s womb. This offers us a spirituality that does not turn away from the Earth in order to seek God above the Earth. As Jean-Louis Chrétien puts it: ‘We cannot tear ourselves away from the world in order to offer ourselves to God.’

**(IMAGE 8d – Society)** *Society*:

The damaging aspects of an unbalanced emphasis on the sacred masculine are seen most disturbingly in their social out workings. The subjugation of women and violence against women in politics, work, sport, education, science, family are glaring and persistent in our society. Clearly, Marduk is alive and well! Recovery of the sacred feminine is essential to redress this gross injustice. Brittany Higgins and Grace Tame are remarkable advocates of this redress in our time. But the whole movement of feminist and eco-feminists research, action, and advocacy in every aspect of human life is fundamental to the birthing of a new creation which is so urgently needed.

**(IMAGE 8e – Self)** *Self*:

The powerful image of the human being as an independent and autonomous centre of being, thought, desire and action is basic to our contemporary culture. The economic theories and policies that have been dominant over the past decades conceive of humans as independent consumers competing in the market place for scarce resources. But the idea of the ‘self-made man’ is not only an illusion, it is a deep and dangerous untruth. Again, we need to recover the Mother’s truth. The I is always a ‘nested-I’, and the natal image here is deliberate. We are born as individuals in a matrix of relationships, both in human society and in the wider ecology of the Earth. Everything is interconnected.

**(IMAGE 8f – Church)** *Church*:

We have said enough about the importance of a feminist critique of the life of our church communities, both local and denominational. The significance of the image of Mother God for the church and for all its members is already clear, even if it is resisted still, and quite strongly, in some areas. The process of critique and transformation, push and pull, is underway in BUC. And it is important that we keep exploring together its further unfolding.

**(IMAGE 8g – Bible)** *Bible*:

Our sacred text, the Bible, was written and compiled in the period of history that follows the great reversal, the supplanting of the sacred feminine by the sacred masculine. And as feminist theologians have brilliantly shown, the Bible bears the marks of that reversal. Male imagery and language for God are dominant in the text. But they are certainly not exclusive. Remember the startling birth imagery in God’s speech to Job in Job chapter 38.

Or who shut in the sea with doors

when it burst out from the womb?-

when I made the clouds its garment,

and thick darkness its swaddling band,

and prescribed bounds for it . . . Job 38,8-10

God here is a tender mother attending the birth of the sea from her womb and wrapping it in clouds and darkness as its swaddling bands! The Sea ‘is a life force, gushing out of the primordial womb’ born of God, ‘full of life and vigour’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Such a text gives us authority to pursue and to develop a method of biblical reading and interpretation that begins to re-balance the sacred masculine with the counterpoint of the sacred feminine. A re-balance that does *not* undermine the sacred masculine. Rather, it is a balance which expands the reach and the depth of our engagement with God, to include and to celebrate, along with the masculine, the astonishing gifts of the sacred feminine.

**Richard’s Suggestion**

**Further conversation if needed**

**References:**

Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London: BCA, 1991)

Marija Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991)

Anne F. Elvey, *An Ecological Feminist Reading of the Gospel of Luke: A Gestational Paradigm* (New York: The Edward Mellen Press, 2005)

1. Gimbutas’ interpretation of her discoveries has been critiqued, though not the evidence itself. Other scholars have followed and the work is ongoing. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London: BCA, 1991), pp. 2-105. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, p. xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, p. 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Around the time of the Lord’s call to Jeremiah. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The exodus is dated to 13th century BCE. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, p. 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, p. 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid*., 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)