

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

To whom shall we go but to You? You have the words of eternal life. O God, who sees that we are so often bemused by the noise of the world, and so enticed by its doctrines, that we hear not the still voice of the Spirit; help us to listen for Your voice with such singleness of mind, that we may hear You who is Truth, and feel Your presence who is Life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In his book, *The Revenge of Gaia*, the scientist, James Lovelock writes openly about the extinction of humanity. Lovelock quotes the Astronomer Royal and says this:

I am not a pessimist and have always imagined that good in the end would prevail. When our Astronomer Royal, Lord Martin Rees, now President of the Royal Society, published in 2004 his book *Our Final Century*, he dared to think and write about the end of civilisation and the human race. I enjoyed it as a good read, full of wisdom, but took it as no more than a speculation among friends and nothing to lose sleep over.

I was so wrong: it was prescient, for now the evidence coming in from the watchers around the world brings news of an imminent shift in our climate towards one that could easily be described as Hell: so hot, so deadly that only a handful of the teeming billions now alive will survive. We have made an appalling mess of the planet and mostly with rampant liberal good intentions. Even now, when the bell has started tolling to mark our ending, we still talk of sustainable development and renewable energy as if these feeble offerings would be accepted by Gaia as an appropriate and affordable sacrifice.<sup>1</sup>

Lovelock describes the planet Earth as *Gaia*. In using the name, Gaia, he wants us to think of the planet as ‘the living Earth.’ Lovelock clearly states that the

---

<sup>1</sup> Lovelock, James *The Revenge of Gaia* p189

name or concept of Gaia is only a metaphor, like sailors might describe a ship as ‘she.’ He wants us to make an intellectual leap and imagine that the Earth is ‘the largest living thing in the solar system.’ He says that it is dangerous to think of the Earth as mere land or property and the concept of biblical concept of steward is not strong enough. Lovelock states:

Until this change of heart and mind happens we will not instinctively sense that we live on a live planet that can respond to the changes we make, either by cancelling the changes or by cancelling us. Unless we see the Earth as a planet that behaves as if it were alive, at least to the extent of regulating its climate and chemistry, we will lack the will to change our way of life and to understand that we have made it our greatest enemy.<sup>2</sup>

Lovelock is in no doubt: Gaia will tolerate only so much from us and, if we go too far, then she will, with complete indifference, wipe us out. In the 1930s, with the rise of Nazism and the appeasement by Britain, there came a point when Churchill said, ‘The time for half-measures has passed. We are entering a period of consequences.’ The former Vice-President, Al Gore, draws a parallel between our response to Nazism in the 1930s and that of global warming today. We have passed the tipping point. We are entering a period of consequences.

Andrew Marr said of Lovelock’s book that it was ‘the most important book for decades’ while John Gray of the Independent said that ‘Lovelock will go down in history as the scientist who changed our view of the Earth.’ Does Lovelock

---

<sup>2</sup> Lovelock, James The Revenge of Gaia p21f

go too far? Is his science good enough? By way of recommendation, Lovelock suggests that mobile phones, the internet and entertainment from computers are moves in the right direction; ‘they use time and energy that might otherwise be spent travelling by car or aircraft.’ If we were able to return to the 1840s, then this time we would know that fossil fuel combustion would need to be limited and that ‘cattle and sheep farming use far too much land and cannot be sustained’. Arable farming with pigs and chickens would be a better way to go. He is a passionate supporter of nuclear energy. He writes:

We should now be preparing for a rise of sea level, spells of near-intolerable heat like that in Central Europe in 2003, and storms of unprecedented severity....The immediate need is secure and safe sources of energy to keep the lights of civilisation burning...There is no alternative but nuclear-fission energy until fusion energy and sensible forms of renewable energy arrive as a truly long-term provider.<sup>3</sup>

In an increasingly disturbed world, with rising sea levels and an ever-rising demand for energy, we need a reliable source of energy, one which is independent of imports.

There is no doubt, however, what Lovelock sees as the root of humanity’s problem. It is our ‘lack of constraint on the growth of population.’<sup>4</sup> Al Gore said that when he was born there were six billion people on the planet. It had taken thousands upon thousands of years for humanity to evolve to the level of

---

<sup>3</sup> Lovelock, James *The Revenge of Gaia* p196

<sup>4</sup> Lovelock, James *The Revenge of Gaia* p180

six billion people. By the time he dies, if he lives to a reasonable old age, the world's population will be nine billion. In the course of one life time, the Earth's human population will have increased by 50%. Lovelock says that if we do not get to grips with this, then Gaia will: all those extra billions breathing out CO<sub>2</sub>.

In a sermon for Harvest Thanksgiving, James S Stewart preached about the spiritual harvest, the harvest of souls. He said:

What is our faith, when all is said and done, a vague conventional half-belief, a tame and formal assent that masks a latent scepticism – or is it, as Christ would have it, the very basis of our being and our thinking and our planning, an intense and vigorous and passionate conviction of God's grace and God's sufficiency?

What a wonderful definition of faith! Faith is 'the very basis of our being and our thinking and our planning, an intense and vigorous and passionate conviction of God's grace and God's sufficiency.' We have God-given intelligence and we know that humanity is moving towards mortal danger, maybe not us but our grandchildren.

What can we do? Lovelock says that at the time of Jesus the greatest need was to focus on relations between peoples, between individuals and between different tribes and nations. Today, he calls on the Church for a new Sermon on the Mount, one in which the focus is on humanity's relation to the living

Earth. Two weeks ago I said that, in the Old Testament, the people of Israel came to understand Yahweh as dwelling within them, the *Shekinah*, the Holy Spirit. The direct consequence of that revelation was that a crime against or disrespect towards another human being was a crime against or disrespect towards God Himself. Humanity was the holy dwelling place of Yahweh. Today we need a new theological insight, a new revelation, if I may put it that way. We need to understand that abuse or misuse of the Earth is a religious offence, a sacrilege, a violation against what is sacred. To abuse the Earth is to abuse God Himself.

Drawing on classical theology, Rowan Williams says that God ‘energises, makes real, makes active what there is’. He says, ‘Our theology has lost that extraordinarily vivid or exhilarating sense of the world penetrated by divine energy...’ It is increasingly important for us to see the Earth as ‘a member of our body, a part of our very flesh, inseparable from our story, our history and our destiny.’ In the seventh century, St Isaac the Syrian called Christians to acquire ‘a merciful heart, which burns with love for the whole of creation – for humans, for birds, for the beasts, for demons – for all God’s creatures.’ In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote:

Love all God’s creation, the whole of it and every grain of sand.  
Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light! Love the animals, love  
the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will  
perceive the divine mystery in things.

Kiss the earth ceaselessly and love it insatiably.

Speaking during a visit to the United States in 1997, Ecumenical Patriarch

Bartholomew said:

To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation; for humans to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands; for humans to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air and its life with poisonous substances – these are sins.

The scientist, James Lovelock, may be a prophet of doom, only time will tell.

But his call to the Church and to other world religions to challenge the reductionist view of the Earth is timely. Our faith is 'the very basis of our being and our thinking and our planning, an intense and vigorous and passionate conviction.' We are to kiss the earth ceaselessly and love it insatiably. We are to understand, perhaps for the first time, our place in the Earth's story rather than its place in ours. On Harvest Sunday, we give thanks for the wealth of food and wines in our shops. We give thanks for the farmers and fishermen who make our life comfortable and pleasurable. But each of us must think very hard about how we walk upon the Earth. As if understanding for the first time, we see that the Earth, the whole Earth, is holy ground. It is the dwelling-place of God. It is the Body of God.

Amen.