



## CLIMATE JUSTICE & DISCIPLESHIP

# REFLECTION WEEK 1 - HUMILITY

BY THE REVD DR PENIEL RAJKUMAR

---

What might be a good place to start reflecting upon humility in relation to ecological discipleship? Perhaps from the earth itself... because the root word for humility is the Latin word *humus*, which also means the earth (the ground). To be humble is literally to be grounded. Humility in the context of ecological discipleship is, in some ways, about a dual groundedness:

- Humility in inter-relationality – recognising our deep connection with creation.
- Humility in transformation – embracing change for the renewal of the earth.

### A Humility that is Grounded in Inter-relationality

First, it is the humility that is grounded in inter-relationality. In the biblical imagination, the earth serves as a metaphor of the inter-relationality between human beings and creation. In Genesis 2, we read that not just Adam (literally 'earth being' in Hebrew) but also the trees, the animals, and the birds are created by God out of the earth:

*"So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air." (Genesis 2:19)*

This is a deeply relational bond—almost of kinship.

However, over centuries, this relationship has been destroyed through the sin of greed. Greed has fostered a distorted self-understanding of human beings as masters over creation. Rather than nurturing a sense of inter-relationality, greed has reduced both planet and people to expendable objects to be exploited for profit and power.

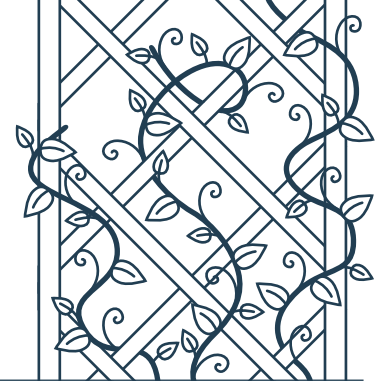
Greed is essentially about disintegration. The Greek word for greed is *aplistos*, which is the opposite of *plistos*, meaning integration. Greed is a breaking away from our inter-relationships with creation. Its economic doctrines have normalised extractivism and exploitation as essential for the pursuit of false prosperity and even peace. The fact that today, global politicians speak openly about ecological plunder as the price that war-ravaged countries have to pay for peace is a symptom of the genocidal nature of our greed. We seem to have fallen into *"the marsh of obsolete materialism and moral nihilism,"* as Martin Luther King warned, creating a world of guided missiles and misguided men. We say, *"peace, peace,"* when there is no peace!

In such a context, a humility born out of inter-relationality invites us to cultivate a new moral imagination, one that affirms our interconnectedness. The teaching from today's reading from Philippians—to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but to look to the interests of others—can lead to such inter-relational humility. Here, our well-being is understood in terms of our *inter-being*, what Archbishop Desmond Tutu has called *planetary ubuntu*—



## CLIMATE JUSTICE & DISCIPLESHIP

# REFLECTION WEEK 1: HUMILITY



acknowledging that we are what we are because of creation.

One person in the Christian tradition who provides such an imagination is St Francis of Assisi, widely considered the patron saint of ecology. In one of his songs, *The Canticle of the Sun*, St Francis imagines various elements of nature not as inanimate objects but as living beings with whom we share a familial relationship. A few lines from this song are as follows:

Praised be You, my Lord, with all your creatures,  
especially Brother Sun, who is the day and through whom You give us light...

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,  
in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,  
and through the air, cloudy and serene,  
and every kind of weather through which You give sustenance to Your creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,  
which is very useful, humble, precious, and chaste.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,  
through whom You light the night;  
and he is beautiful, playful, robust, and strong.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth,  
who sustains us and governs us and who produces  
varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Such an imagination prevents us from depersonalising our relationship with nature—reducing it to an object for our own ends. Instead, it infuses our relationship with the grammar of grace, gratitude, and glory rather than the grammar of gain and greed.

During this Lent, humility might mean celebrating this inter-relationality. It might mean learning a little about how our lives are intrinsically interconnected with nature, especially from the wisdom of our siblings from different indigenous communities. Humility might also mean learning about the impact of our choices and actions on nature and on our neighbours in different parts of the world. Though climate change affects all of us, some are more affected than others—these others are often the poor and vulnerable.

### **A Humility that is Grounded in Transformation**

The second type of humility I invite us to reflect on is humility grounded in transformation. This is linked to our being and becoming in Jesus Christ, in whom we are created for good works (Ephesians 2:10). Being created in Christ is also about being *re-created*—because Jesus Christ, as the second Adam, is also the first fruits of the new creation.

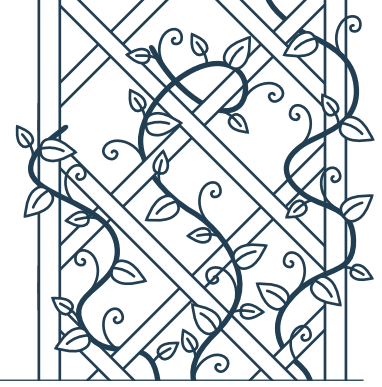
In the context of climate injustice, a humility which can give birth to transformation starts with genuine repentance – a life-transforming turn around – a departure from the status quo... a life-giving disruption of a death-dealing world. Let us not forget that dust of the earth is also a symbol of repentance in the Bible.

For the healing of the earth and of ourselves, we need to let go of our ongoing patterns of consumption and growth. Our quest for renewable sources of energy is often driven by the desire to continue our current patterns of living - which are obsessed with speed, scale and



## CLIMATE JUSTICE & DISCIPLESHIP

# REFLECTION WEEK 1: HUMILITY



strength.

In his book *Act Justly*, Sam Wells reminds us that in the context of climate change, to repent doesn't mean, "*continue to consume at exponentially increasing rates... but be sure to check those resources are renewable.*" Rather, repentance involves questioning and disrupting the very patterns on which our lives are based.

In a world where entire countries are drowning, we need to rise beyond feel-good environmentalism and responsible consumerism within existing patterns of production and consumption. What is needed is a truly transformative humility – which refuses to be part of the glory and gains of current economic systems. The Bible reading for today gives us an example of such disruptive humility:

*"Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." (Philippians 2:6-7)*

Against the common temptation to exploit power, Jesus empties himself of power. The logic of mastery is broken down. Instead of exploitation, service becomes central.

The Japanese theologian, Kosuke Koyama, in his book *Three Mile an Hour God* offers a pattern of Christian discipleship that is not modelled after the speed of development, but after the spirit of love, as reflected in Jesus Christ. According to Koyama, given that the average speed of humans is three miles an hour, the God who comes to us in Jesus, as one of us, is a *three mile an hour God*. He teaches us the speed of love, which is slow, gentle and tender, and is at variance with the speed of the world. Can we this Lent reflect on what it might mean to follow this three-mile-an-hour God?

A humility that is transformative in a richly diverse world like ours can also be a humility that learns from those communities which are taking important steps to repair our groaning creation. In Ecuador, the Sarayaku people practise the principle of *sumak kawsay* – which emphasises living well through contentment and creativity rather than unchecked consumption. Zimbabwean churches have brought together biblical and local ecological principles in an innovative '*Farming in God's Way*' project. In the Church of South India, priests give baptismal candidates saplings to plant, reminding them about the sacramental dimension of nurturing God's creation alongside nurturing one's faith. "*A Bible in one hand and a sapling in the other*" should perhaps be the new mandate for the church's eco-witness.

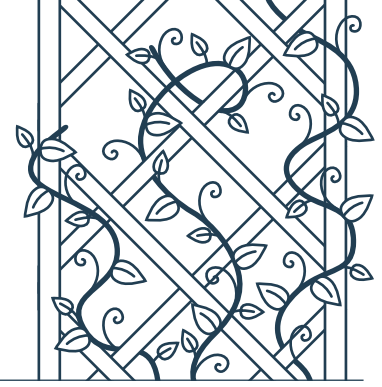
A transformative humility in the context of climate change can also be what I call '*Witness*' – a willingness to work in solidarity with people across faith traditions. Sometimes faith communities may suffer from 'host-ility' or the 'will-to-host' always – where one might struggle to cooperate with others on projects where we are not the lead actors. Humility in such contexts might involve working alongside others, despite not having the centre stage.

### Conclusion

Dear friends, we live in a time of *de-creation*, where God's creation is being systemically undone—"running Genesis in reverse," as someone put it. At such a time, when we can no longer make the mark of ash on our foreheads at Lent without thinking of the burning earth,



CLIMATE JUSTICE & DISCIPLESHIP  
REFLECTION WEEK 1:  
HUMILITY



Christian discipleship should be shaped by the transformative humility of Jesus, who says a resounding *No* to self-aggrandising power.

And what better place to learn this humility than at the cross, which teaches us time and again that God's power to transform the world is found in places where we least expect it—even on a cross.

May this life-transforming power of the cross be ours today and always. May it inspire us to work for a renewed creation in the spirit of repentance and repair.

If not, the words of an ancient Chinese proverb might turn out to be poignantly true:

*"If we do not change direction, we will end up where we are heading."*

Let us choose life, so that we, our children, and the earth—our common home—may live.

The Revd Dr Peniel Rajkumar

11th March 2025