

THE PASSION OF THE EARTH: 33RD SUNDAY B

We've all heard, and heard with sadness, of the Passion of Jesus Christ. We are well aware of our own sufferings, and to some extent the sufferings of whole populations of people such as those in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. What we need to become far more conscious of, however, is the passion of Mother Earth, the one and only planet inhabited by human beings, the one and only place where human beings can live, the one and only place where God has put us. Tragically, as a result of massive industrialization, our earth is being exploited, assaulted, ravaged and destroyed at a rate unprecedented in history. For me, *'the time of distress'* mentioned by Jesus in his gospel prophecy today, is the distress of the earth at the present time, and the distress of the people of the earth who, more than ever before, are asking questions of survival and sustainability: *'Is it all over? Or is there anything we can do to save God's good and beautiful world, not only for ourselves, but for all the generations of human beings who will come after us?'*

Consider just a few facts about the damage that has been inflicted and continues to be inflicted on the finite resources of our earth by our modern, technological, industrial, consumer, throw-away society. In general terms and global terms our modern industrialized society is destroying our air, water, sunlight and soils, and causing the extinction of a vast number of creatures that God has placed on this earth with us. Every part of the globe and every ecosystem on earth is now affected, in some instances in an irreversible way.

There is a terrible problem with LAND. Poor land management, overgrazing, chemical agriculture, crops of one kind only, deforestation and population pressures have caused soil poisoning, soil erosion and desert territory on an alarming scale. About 3500 million hectares - an area the size of North and South America are affected by land degradation resulting in reduced cropping and ultimately desert territory. Experts at Cornell University, New York, estimate that world-wide about 85 billion tonnes of soil are lost each year. Here in Australia from a total of 5 million square kilometres used for agriculture and grazing, about 2.7 million square kilometres are affected by wind erosion, water erosion, and salinity. Applying the brakes will involve tree planting, improved farming techniques, organic farming and better land use, with or without government assistance.

There is a terrible problem with WATER. Human activity is polluting water in the oceans, rivers and lakes. More than 97% of all the water on earth is sea water. During the 1998 UNESCO Year of the Ocean it emerged that the oceans are being seriously over-fished and polluted. Areas of the ocean close to the continental shelf are contaminated with human, agricultural, industrial and radioactive waste, much of it toxic and carcinogenic. Because we human beings have tended to treat the oceans as sewers, the Baltic, Mediterranean, Black, Caspian, Yellow and South China Seas, are all seriously damaged. Even our Great Barrier Reef, which runs for 1,284 miles, is under threat to its coral and sea creatures because of rising ocean temperature and agricultural pollution. According to a report by the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) in 1995, over 70% of the world's marine fish stocks are either *'fully-to-heavily exploited, overexploited, or slowly recovering'*. Many countries face problems in the supply of clean water for domestic purposes including drinking.

There is a terrible problem is with AIR. Chemical pollution is changing the composition of the earth's atmosphere, destroying the ozone layer, producing climate changes and exposing human beings to higher levels of dangerous ultraviolet radiation. Concentration of carbon dioxide, methane, carbons and other '*greenhouse*' gases are expected to increase by 30% during the next 50 years. This build-up is likely to raise Earth's temperature by between 1.5 and 4.5 degrees centigrade by the year 2030. As the oceans warm up and expand, sea levels will rise, leading to ferocious storms and severe flooding over lowland areas. Some of our Pacific Island neighbours must either evacuate or perish. In the run up to the Kyoto meeting on climate change in December 1997, there was a call for a 60% reduction in the use of fossil fuel. The politicians settled for a miserly 6%. Australia opposed even that. Dependence on supplies of polluting oil for transport, building materials, cars, plastics and pharmaceuticals, means that our capitalist economies would simply collapse if the oil wells run dry.

There is a terrible problem with FORESTS. Tropical forests once covered 20% of the land area of the earth. They are now disappearing at an extraordinary rate. An area greater than the United Kingdom is cleared and destroyed each year, for logging, cattle ranching and agriculture. Since 1780 two-thirds of Australia's native forests and three-quarters of our rainforests have been removed, with drastic effects on land fertility, climate, rainfall, agriculture, human health, the health of rivers and estuaries, and the mega-extinction of species. In Australia 2,200 plant species are endangered, half of our mammals are threatened, 10% of our native birds, 20% of our reptiles, amphibians and freshwater fish. Mega-extinction is the direct result of the expansion of the industrial economy into fragile eco-systems like rainforests.

Our human-centred moral and ethical categories fail to even register what is happening, let alone respond to it in a sustained and creative way.

How, then, should we respond to the ecological crisis, the passion of mother earth? What can we do and what must we do, as good stewards of God our Creator, to save our earth from its present acute distress?

bgleesoncp@gmail.com