

Along the track

Peaceful Co-existence

For a brief period I lived in the beautiful town of Marysville. The Australian bush looked down on this picturesque little community where old style guest houses gave such pleasure to holiday makers for decades and decades. They were beautiful rambling buildings which spoke of a by-gone era. Some had been meticulously restored and tastefully modernised. The surrounding bush invited slowness and quiet and nothing encouraged haste or speed. The pristine creeks and waterfalls were incredible. This ancient bush was scarred in places with reminders of the 1939 bushfires that devastated much of Victoria. And then it happened again. On Black Saturday, in a few short hours, this beautiful place was destroyed. Few buildings remained. The loss of life was devastating.

We live in a beautiful but harsh country and, try as we might, we have still not tamed it; every now and then it breaks free with floods and fires, winds and devastating rain to show us who's the boss, to remind us of our need to learn to live together in peaceful cooperation. Every now and then houses built on flood plains are inundated, rivers take back their old courses, deserts reclaim farms that have encroached on their territory and bushfires sweep across the lot. Nature fights back.

After the fires had roared through, the bush around Marysville stood defiantly and, over coming months and years, little by little the green shoots appeared and some trees began to grow again. Wildlife returned, slowly and steadily. But the scars on the landscape persist to remind us to think again about what we are doing. They ask how we are learning to live with our natural environment. Not the other way around.

Just near where I live an old house was recently demolished. Although it had seen better days, it was surrounded by some lovely, old heritage trees. A machine arrived, fences were erected and down it came. Crunched up like an old bag. The old timber could not even be reclaimed and used. That went to landfill. The block was cleaned, a blank canvass for the new owner. But slowly the old place crept back – the odd bulb appeared, some flowers and one shrub that they missed began to emerge again. A new house has been built, and the bulbs keep coming! They are not going anywhere.

All this is a reminder of the cycle of life. We are not here for long. Our very life is a gift, from God and others. We are not here by random chance. We are here at this time and place for a purpose. We are not

the owners of our land but rather the custodians and carers, the nurturers for the next generations. That applies whether we are country or city dwellers. How we choose to live, what we chose to buy, what we choose to use and re-use, what lifestyle we pursue all affect God's gift of creation. When our time has come and gone, nature will remain, bruised and damaged, polluted and endangered or nurtured and treasured, employed and replaced, farmed and replenished.

We live on in what we hand on, not just material wealth but in the values and beliefs that we have lived out, in what others have been able to see in our actions more than just in our words. In Pope Francis' words, *"Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature."* In reality, we are dependent on each other, our futures are interlinked. In his encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis speaks of this as an integral ecology: *'an integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness'*.

Simple daily actions count. They help us to acknowledge in more than just words and aspirations the damage our actions are doing to the gift of creation and our stewardship of it. That damage is staring us in the face. The over-filled rubbish bins in cities and towns on Sunday mornings speak just as starkly of needless waste, just as starkly as the polluted rivers and oceans we see on our TV screens. That pollution has to come from somewhere, from someone, from a decision someone or some group has made. The demolished houses where nothing is recycled, the use of pesticides and poisons, even in domestic gardens all speak of exploitation and selfishness. Those old, dead trees around Marysville have stood as reminders that creation, 'nature' is an extraordinary gift and a continuing challenge. We simply have to get along. We cannot be indifferent to what is going on around us or simply shrug at the loss or destruction caused by irresponsible and selfish behaviour, ours or anyone else's. "Because of us", Pope Francis wrote, "thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence."

And we don't give much glory to God by our action and our neglect either.

Regards
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