Sabbatical return sermon AS 2020.

I want to share what I discovered on my sabbatical, which was more like a 3month retreat which gave me time to explore and reflect on what was at the forefront of a lot of peoples thoughts and fears in this very strange time on earth.

Because of lockdown I had to cancel my travel plans so I took a different kind of journey - I read a lot and got involved in some really interesting zoom meetings with some of the authors I had been reading, One of them was a lifelong heroine of mine Jane Goodall, her book ‘In the shadow of man” had captivated me as a teenager. She was a researcher and spent her time researching a troop of chimpanzees in the Gombe stream area of Africa. Now at 82 she is a campaigner for the conservation of wildlife and continues to travel extensively and give talks. On my zoom meeting with her she was explaining to us that we are in a very dangerous place and time in earths history. The devastation human beings are causing to the planet is unsustainable and the virus is a direct result of our actions and abuse of natural resources.

This became a theme for my whole sabbatical as I came across more and more speakers and writers who emphasised the reality that as a species we are systematically taking the earth apart piece by piece, destroying habitats and polluting the air, the sea and the land. Throughout history we have destroyed cultures and indigenous populations with the arrogant belief that our culture is superior and others are savage and ignorant. We treat the earth and her creatures as resources and commodities for profits and have faith in the myth of unending economic growth. One writer suggests that we were living by a story that justifies this behaviour; a story of separation. A story that supports the belief that the earth is an inanimate object filled with accidental biological organisms for mans exploitation. Objects, that are inanimate – without spirit are easily commodified for our use. This has been the story of the Empirical nations for hundreds of years where all too often even lesser humans are bought and sold.

But as I continued to delve deeper I was reminded that humanity hadn’t always lived by this story, this was made clear in a beautiful film I discovered called Tai Pai – the voice of the forest where the indingenous people of the amazon forest saw no separation between themselves and the forest, they were so much a part of it, this generous life giving earth that at one point one of them turned to the interviewer and said ‘the forest is hungry we need to gather food’ His own hunger was the forests hunger.

It made me realise with all our so called progess, we have lost so much of what it means to be alive, to be human.

We are not separate from the earth. We are as much a part of the earth as the clay beneath our feet, and as dependant on the health of the earth as the seas and the forests.

Think about it. Would you be able to breathe if there were no oxygen producing plants? Would you be able to live if there were no fresh water? Trees and forests provide the basic necessities that sustain all life. A forest affects the weather system as its humidity draws in the rain clouds. When it falls the trees purify the water through their great bodies drawing it back up into the atmosphere and guiding it deep into the ground to fill the water table. At the same time the trees nourish the soil and give it stability so that it doesn’t all run off, instead they release minerals that flow down to the sea and take iron and other nutrients not found in the sea to feed marine life that would have no access to those minerals without the forests. So interwoven is the natural world that if we had no forests we would have no fish. The great forests of the earth are still the greatest source of medicinal plants whose cures are yet to be fully discovered as well as home for so much diverse life. They are the lungs of the earth and we are destroying them.

We are not separate in any way from nature, we are beings, woven into a beautiful world of utterly interdependent lives of tree and plant, fur, feathered and finned beings, all part of a vibrant alive web of life; of Interbeing.

There were many who I discovered who believed that the world is filled with a spirit of life which is the life of every living and being.

I could totally agree with them, because for me this is what our story, the Christian story was about. But they hadn’t heard our story this way, they still saw our story as part of the Empire with its history as evidence. They saw the Christian story as one that historically supported the story of separation as it encouraged the destruction of difference in culture and indigenous beliefs and proclaimed its God in heaven far from earth, triumphant and judging. They agreed that a few of the Christian mystics saw the divine in all the earth, but reminded me that the church had shut a lot of them up throughout history.

It really impressed on me that we have not told Jesus story at all well, something I’ve felt for a long time.

Because for me Jesus story was never about Empire, entirely the opposite in fact. For me Jesus perception of life and his teachings are all about the divine being within us and all life. In the sacredness, the Living spirit, of all; the birds of the air, the lillies of the field, the stones and the earth and the creatures, human and more than human.

Like any research we are always left with more questions than answers but, one thing I am sure of is this, The myth of separation that we are fed,about a God distant and beyond matter, or heaven a place far from earth that we must aspire to, about a rock in the universe that accidentally sprouted life, about the survival of the fittest through economic growth, about using the infinite resources of the planet even if that means killing tens of thousands to secure your Kingdom, about destroying cultures and creatures that don’t fit your narrow perceptions, is a story that will end badly. We have to re-member the story we have inherited, remember especially the parts throughout the old testament where not caring for the earth had dire consequences for the people, remembering that the incarnation of Christ was not just a one off event but a living symbol of the true nature of I AM sunk deep into matter, all matter.This is a story that might remind us all that the earth is alive with Living presence, filled with Holy breath, and that every morcel is the body and blood of the divine presence.

A story that reveals every tree as full of being, giving shelter and sustenance to a multitude of Beings, who are all the One Being expressing creativity and love in all of creation. We may have to sacrifice some of our historical dogmas and language,

because we too need to see with new eyes that every molecule, mountain and clod of soil is filled with divine presence, creativity and love, and know it like the tribesman knew the forest. Then we might think twice about cutting down trees, destroying habitats and decrying cultures different to our own, We might think twice about dynamiting mountains, overfishing and polluting seas. We might think twice that heaven and earth are separate places and allow God back into earth and into the story of Interbeing that Jesus originally told us.

Then we might have a story worth listening to, a story needed now more than ever before.

Amen