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Reducing the Human Footprint.

How good to be spending World Environment Day [and also incidentally my wedding anniversary] in Estonia whose recent history provides encouraging examples of environmental concern being successfully translated into political action. I am thinking especially of the response to the proposal to open a phosphate mine at Rakvere near Narva. If the plan had gone ahead, the consequences for Lake Peipsi and the Parnu river would have been severe pollution.

It is not always easy however to resist such proposals when they emanate from power structures at some remove from the people they most intimately affect, [and we shall doubtless hear some reflections on this theme when the representative of RAIPON speaks].

Many ecological problems are, of course, no respecters of borders and there is a problem of governance in the global institutions which already exist and which have an impact on the environment. For understandable reasons, for example, commercial considerations play a dominant role at the World Trade Organisation. Joe Stiglitz, the Nobel Prize Winner for Economics in 2001 observes in his important book, *Globalization and its Discontents*, that “Those that seek to prohibit the use of nets that harvest shrimp but also catch and endanger turtles are told by the WTO that such regulation would be an unwarranted intrusion on free trade. They discover that trade considerations trump all others including the environment.”

There is no wickedness here. It is a matter of mind sets and what is visible to us and what is not. This is of course powerfully inflected by the structures of accountability within which the existing global institutions must work. The IMF reflects the concerns of those like central bankers who begin their day worrying about inflation statistics and not poverty statistics. The trade ministers who create the climate at the WTO worry about export numbers not pollution indices.

The challenge is to develop our global institutions so that they are responsive to the environmental agenda and the voice of the poor in the decisions that affect them. The difficulty should not be underestimated. Poor people are often ill equipped to intervene effectively in the debates, which preoccupy global institutions. NGO's, scientific associations, faith communities need to guard their independence to speak up for the poor of the world.

The Jubilee Campaign was just such an initiative, which has had a palpable impact on global policy makers. It is particularly important to enlarge the room sympathetic

politicians have for manoeuvre. In a democratic society they cannot move much faster than public opinion and all of us on this boat have a responsibility to set the electoral scene for positive change. But we must also strive to avoid a lurch away from the tentative style of good science and mature faith into the ideological dogmatism and taste for infallibility which is an ever present danger for all large institutions.

As I say, we all have a responsibility here. Blessed be the journalist who first identified the “hole” in the ozone layer, a graspable concept which has done much to undermine complacency in an area where processes unfold over a period of time and are thus difficult for an information order which privileges events and dramatic happenings, to present.

This is why I was grateful also for Carina Borgstrom Hansson’s presentation on the human footprint which provides a helpful measure of our disproportionate impact on the planet as citizens, in the main, of the G8.

It is an important task to awaken ourselves and our neighbours to our responsibilities and to suggest ways in which we can make a small contribution while at the same time deepening our awareness of what is really at stake. Most of the time of course we are very much preoccupied with the threats to our own interests and lifestyles. I have been fascinated to follow the reporting of the SARS story. It is a serious matter and of course the rapid communication of viruses is one of the aspects of our inter-connected world. But the very few cases of SARS confirmed in the Western world have received much coverage and generated great anxiety while the daily carnage inflicted by malaria on the children in Africa goes largely unnoticed. A Tanzanian researcher quoted by the Economist in a recent issue, points out that the daily death toll among African children from malaria is equivalent to 7 Boeing 747’s crashing into Mount Kilimanjaro every day. All those involved in public life in any way have a responsibility to bring such invisible suffering to light.

The question of mindset however is a deeper one. The impact of our footprint on the earth is hugely heavier than that of Man Friday in Robinson Crusoe. It has kept pace with the development of a way of being in the world, which is peculiar to our civilisation. Nietzsche asked “Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to?”

Faith comes from Annunciation, a movement from the side of the Other, a conviction that there is datum, something given in nature and that we are participants with many others in a web of life, creatures of the earth as Genesis proclaims and Darwin confirmed. Our responsibility as human beings is stated in pithy terms in the Book of Genesis to be “tillers and keepers” of this earth. We have a mandate both to develop the earth but also to preserve it and to respect its deep structure.

Since the entire horizon was sponged away however the earth has come to appear very different. The earth has become no more than an unrestricted theatre of human willing,

mere matter to be exploited and manipulated for our commodity. This I take to be Heidegger's concern in "The Question Concerning Technology. Heidegger views the way we live now as a species of Nietzschean willing, dangerously abstracted from the earth. Instead of being participants in an ordered creation, maintaining the balance prescribed in Genesis of "tilling and keeping the earth" we have surreptitiously deified ourselves and assumed the role of "masters and possessors of the earth" [Descartes]. The ecological crisis is in reality a crisis of unawareness, of a peculiar, historically conditioned way of being in the world.

[Heidegger says "Everywhere, everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering."] [The Question Concerning Technology]

This is the background to the unsustainable modern project of growth without limit with no end in view beyond the process itself. It is a project which has enriched some but has left many worse off in a world where, according to the United Nations Development Programme, if the poorest half of the world pooled their income it would be insufficient to pay the world- wide bill for military expenditure.

Carina Borgstrom Hansson directed our attention to ways of "remedying the current ecological deficit or overshoot." She did not neglect the possibility of alternative visions of progress. That is right but the trouble is that very little transforming energy seems to flow from exhortations to ethical fraternity or more rhetoric about the plight of the poor.

It is here that the faith communities may have some resources to offer. Unfortunately where there is no living Spirit filled worship and the Church has capitulated to the dominant mode of reasoning in Western culture then, although residual patterns of language and personal habits may persist, "public religion", in the words of the Canadian Anglican scholar, George Grant, becomes "an unimportant litany of objectified self righteousness necessary for the more anal of our managers." I am going to make a suggestion which will be regarded with incredulity by the cultured despisers. Humility is more than ever necessary if we dare to suggest that there might be spiritual resources to match the seriousness of the hour.

There is a resource and a way of transformation in the liturgy. You can take life for granted but the liturgical way is to take hold of life with thanksgiving. In the process mere matter is revealed as a gift of divine love. We may enter the liturgy with a swagger as Descartes' masters and possessors of the earth but the communication of God in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ converts us instead from being masters into his guests.

In pronouncing blessings and giving thanks, we make our protest against the various forms of reductionism which reject openness and otherness by taking life as nothing beyond the obvious. In pronouncing this thanksgiving, we cry out, not to some confected divinity of our own, but to the pre-comprehensible, open to the mystery of which we are a part.

All closed systems, ideologies which purport to describe absolute totality, [we think of the materialist ideologies which until recently held sway in the countries through which we have been passing], suffer from the defect that it is impossible to postulate such a system without to some extent surreptitiously putting “myself” in place of the whole.

Mystery is the only appropriate designation of the totality of which we form a part so that we cannot achieve an independent standpoint from which we can view the whole as an object, get behind or fathom it. The appropriate approach to mystery is a cry, Lord! Open thou our lips. And, Save me from the delusion of infallibility.

Together with the observance of the Sabbath as a festival of equilibrium and enoughness and a renewal in the practice of fasting and prayer, the experimental liturgical life has been refreshed in the course of the past century. The beauty of the liturgical life is the signature of the Spirit whose festival we shall soon be celebrating and she continues to be alluring. It is still sometimes difficult, however, to discern real action, movement and desire for transformation in liturgies. They can easily resemble either cultural fossils or dreary audio-visual aids to acquiring information about Christian doctrine. The poet Auden sadly reflected that even the early Christians saw their agape decline “into a late lunch with Constantine”. The scribes are still with us, picking over the tags and bones of dead men’s thoughts as a substitute for engagement with the living Spirit.

Properly undertaken, however, liturgical work has the potential to create a powerful and salvific ethos in the context of which ethics can be energised. We must find a way through the puzzle that we know a lot but we seem, especially those of us who live in the richer countries, unable to effect the transformation of heart and mind which is needed if we are to live with self restraint and a joyful spirit of sacrifice – all leading to a reduction in our shoe sizes, and a diminution of our footprints.