

In the Beginning...

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Sunrise in Yamba: Photo by Tony Nielsen

In the beginning...
How to understand those three words?
Can one enter a beginning?
If so, how?
Who or what initiates the beginning?
And if there is an Initiator
it must be prior to what it initiates,
unless, of course,
the Initiator IS the beginning...

In the beginning... Those three words, familiar to many of us, invited me into a week-long retreat recently. They are the opening words of the book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, which tells the story of creation. The story is structured on a week, each day given to an aspect of the work of creation: *Morning came and evening came, the first day.*

My companion and guide on that retreat was Kate Rigby, present through her book *Meditations on Creation in an Era of Extinction*¹. Kate devotes a chapter to each 'day' of creation, but, as the title of her book suggests, she explores it in the context of the ecological reality of today and the devastating impact of our consumer mentality on

¹ Kate Rigby, *Meditations on Creation in an Era of Extinction*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 2023.

creation. She also shares many inspiring stories of people working to regenerate and protect the environment in various parts of the world.

As my retreat progressed, the reality of the damage we continue to do to the atmosphere, the waters, the land, to the habitat of countless creatures who share this Earth with us, started to weigh heavily on me. I wrote in my journal:

Reflecting on all this, I feel a deep weariness and ask myself, does too much information become counter-productive?

As I sit in silence with that question, I am led to hope. But what is hope? On what do I base my hope? It has to be more than my getting to heaven, which I may have thought in earlier years. It has to be inclusive of the entire Cosmos which God sees as good, indeed, as very good.



The Macquarie Marshes on Wayliwan Country NSW. Photo RiverSmart Australia

I continued to sit in silence with my questions. Then I 'heard' within me the words of St Paul:

**Hope does not disappoint because
the love of God has been poured into our hearts
by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom. 5: 5).**

I am very familiar with that verse, particularly the second part of it. I have returned to it numerous times over the years. But I had not paid as much attention to its context of *hope* and that God's love poured into us by the Holy Spirit is the basis for our hope. God's love *poured* into our hearts – the expression evokes a sense of abundance. Paul is writing to people facing great difficulties, even persecution, for being Christians. He encourages them, reminding them that

hardship develops perseverance, perseverance develops character, character produces hope and hope does not disappoint (Rom. 5:4)

Then follows the verse that gives hope its foundation and confidence:

because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

What more can we ask? God is love, so our scriptures tell us. If this is so, the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit is God's very self. And Love is not poured out into our hearts for us to hug to ourselves, but so that it may flow through us to the whole of creation and return to us from all creation. The Cosmos is alive and ever creative because the love of God, the God of Love, flows through it all as the pattern that connects, drawing us into communion, so that creation as a whole may come to the fullness the Creator destines for it. To be a conduit for Love to flow: that is my mission; that is our shared mission.

Hope is the confidence that energises our mission. It does not sit down, waiting for God to sort out the wrongs of this world. Weariness, futility and hopelessness are luxuries we cannot allow to disempower us from living hope in action. Neither is hope



Photo by Austin Schmid on Unsplash

based on outcomes. If hope has its foundation in the love of God poured into our hearts, then the mission of hope, hope in action, is about embracing the whole of creation and every being that is part of creation, as God embraces it, embraces it in compassion, mercy, tenderness and love. Hope is about recognising the goodness in every being and to delight in the beauty and wonder of creation as the Creator delights in it. Nothing and no one is to be excluded from our embrace.

This 'no one' includes particularly people the 'world' tends to exclude, to neglect, oppress and abuse, people who are burdened by unrepayable debts, people trapped in violence and wars, mostly not of their own making...

These particularly are embraced by Love,

God's love first, and by extension, God's love in and through us.

God entrusts each of us with unique capabilities to work towards a better world, pouring into our hearts God's own love and mercy to equip us for this task. It has been said that *Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up*. It is love in action.

Hope calls us to go beyond what appears on the surface of things and situations. It calls us to awareness of, and reverence for, the Divine who is present as the *essence* of every being, human and other-than-human. The primary ingredient of creation (if I can use such an expression) is Divine Love. We are literally Divine Love-made-human,

Divine Love-made-the-Cosmos. Many mystics through the ages and from various Faith Traditions have recognised this. They saw creation as God's first incarnation.

Everything that has come into being is an expression of God's self, manifest as the night sky, as the ants that come into my bathroom to drink from the wash basin, as the magpies welcoming the dawning day with their warbling, as the trees that shade us from the heat of the sun, as the meals that nourish us, as the restless ocean, as the children whose playful voices I hear in our neighbourhood, as the homeless man who often sits outside the local supermarket, as the love that binds us into community and family... There is no end to this litany of creation.

Every being is a manifestation of the love and mercy of God, alive and enlivened by the Spirit of God, whether or not they are aware of this. The more the wonder of this enters our consciousness, the more it engenders in us a reverence and respect for all beings. The world might be in a mess, but as people of hope we embrace its messiness, reweaving the bonds of love that bring healing and hope to our broken world, one relationship at a time.

But we need to tend our consciousness of the Divine in-dwelling as the essence of every being and of the Cosmos as a whole. Our contemplative practice is that tending, nourishing, growing and deepening our consciousness until it becomes our constant awareness. Our practice also energises us for our mission as prophets of hope, strengthening our commitment to keep embracing the world in its beauty and its brokenness in both our contemplation and our action.

Our daily contemplative time with the Beloved, engenders in us God's vision of what is possible for our world, and enables us to touch into what is the deepest longing of every human heart, even if people haven't acknowledged that longing or are mistaken in their interpretation of it. Ultimately, that longing is God's longing for creation to come to its fullness on its evolutionary journey. At the same time, it is God's longing for God's own Self to come to Divine fullness in and through creation.

**As prophets of hope
in contemplation and action we plant
seeds of hope which one day,
perhaps long after we are gone,
will grow into great trees
to which some future generation
will turn to find refreshing shade
and nourishment for body
and soul.**

**Until that day, the seedlings
themselves will engender hope
in passers-by with eyes to see.**

