

St Ethelburgas Day: 11 October 2006
Sermon preached by **Canon Lucy Winkett**

This morning I had breakfast with some senior managers of one of the big banks here in the city. We were discussing climate change and the responsibility of business leaders to develop strategies in response. The bankers and the clergy were all listening to the scientist James Lovelock, who is the originator of the Gaia theory of the earth.

Gaia, the ancient goddess, the foundation of the gods of Olympus, mother of the earth and bearer of the starry skies is an apt name for the theory that James Lovelock has been developing for 40 years.

His contention is that the earth is itself a whole living organism, with an almost infinitely complex system of regulatory mechanisms that keep the balance of gasses and elements stable; an hospitable environment for life. Gaia is the concept that the whole earth is a system of interdependent species and plants, rocks, oceans, delicately balanced, supporting and developing life.

James Lovelock has written a book recently in which he speaks not only of the existence of Gaia, but of her compulsion to take revenge on the species that is doing the most damage to her body: humans. His is a gloomy perspective in that he tells us the globe is heating so rapidly, that Gaia has a fever but that she will take steps to cool herself down. He predicts rapid desertification of the planet, and says that sustainable development is a myth. What is needed is not sustainable development and control of carbon emissions, but sustainable retreat. We are to do less, not more, consume less, not perpetuate the fantasy that the planet's 6 billion people can live like us.

The concept of Gaia came to mind as I was reading about St Ethelburga, because she is written about as a wise, authoritative woman; and the Benedictine emphasis on a balanced life rang true with a lifestyle that respects the earth. A wise and authoritative female presence is a recognisable presence down the centuries of human history, and if James Lovelock has his way, from the formation of the earth herself.

Ethelburga of Barking lived until 675AD and was the first Abbess of the great joint Benedictine Abbey at Barking in Essex.

"Entrusted with the rule of this monastery, she proved herself worthy in all things of her brother bishop, both by her own holy life and by her sound and constant care of the community; and of this the heavenly miracles attest". Bede

Light is a recurrent theme: in her own vision of a light brighter than the noonday sun - and the vision of her at her death. One of the other sisters is said to have seen a human body shining more brightly than the sun being drawn up to heaven by golden chords. The key aspect of these visions was that for those who had them, it was not just the vision that was important, but the fact that the vision inspired them to further acts of compassion.

The Hebrew tradition gives us a wise and authoritative feminine presence on which to meditate: that of Wisdom. She is there with God at the creation we are told, she is hospitable, she is, in the book of Proverbs, standing at the crossroads, calling for justice (Proverbs 1.20). She gathers people from the corners of the earth and makes them friends of God. "She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her". (Proverbs 3.18).

It may be that we can say to scientists like James Lovelock who is an agnostic himself that modern science, with its increasingly holistic approach and its understanding of earth science, is only now catching up with the ancient wisdom of Scripture, and that the Biblical character of Wisdom is a forerunner of the theory of Gaia.

In our first lesson this evening, we heard that Wisdom is radiant and unfading and that it is our task to seek her and find her, particularly leaders.

In our second lesson we heard Jesus' teaching consonant with that of so many other religious leaders and prophets; encouraging a life of simplicity, acknowledging our need for food, drink, clothes, but not becoming enthralled by what we have. Ethelburga, as a wise and authoritative woman, a leader and inspirer of both men and women, stands in the tradition of the Hebrew character of wisdom. And as a religious, was one devoted to the rule of Benedict, with its emphasis on stability, listening, patience, fidelity.

In these islands, as all over the world, we are in desperate need of wisdom. The weakening resonance of patriarchal Christianity leads us to look for new metaphors and new assurances.

And in the 21st century, the human perspective from which we pray is entirely new. For the first time in human history, we are able to be co creators, co redeemers and co destroyers of the earth.

This is theologically profound. Activities once solely the preserve of God; the maker of life and the bringer of destruction upon the earth - is now also within the grasp of humans. Humans who once were dependent on the action of God to bring about the end of the world,

are able to do it ourselves. The end times could be at our bidding. The eschaton is a divine prerogative that humans have the possibility to adopt.

These are profound theological questions as they addresses the issue of our trust. In whom do we place our trust? In whom or what is our security?

For the first time, we are able to separate ourselves from the earth and look at it in its entirety. Astronauts have spoken of seeing the earth from space and feeling a strong sense of "home". We know we inhabit a beautiful and blue planet. Our perspective and our imaginative engagement with the heavens and the earth is different from ever before. Gaia is suffering from our pollution and abuse and we search for wisdom to help us begin to heal her and ourselves.

The feminine presence that creates, heals and teaches, that cries for justice, that weeps for her lost children, that steadies her gaze on the suffering of the world is traceable in Wisdom, Rachel, Judith, Mary of Bethany, Mary the mother of Jesus, in Ethelburga and imaginatively in Gaia.

We abandon our acknowledgement and veneration of such feminine presence at our peril. If James Lovelock is right Gaia is holistic and beautiful but she is also fiercely protective and proud. There are notes of suffering and warning in these stories of the heroines of our faith and our world. The supple, stable and robust spirituality that would enable Ethelburga to preside over a large mixed monastery is needed in these days of litigious and adversarial public conversations.

The posturing of governments keen to join the nuclear club, the hawkish policies of societies who rely on war for security, the inability of any of us to contract our own need for consumption. None of this by the way has been changed by the fact that the current Foreign Secretaries of the United States, the United Kingdom and Israel are all women – it's the sensibility of that wise feminine authority that every community, every church, every power structure needs.

Jesus Christ taught that the created order is beautiful – the birds of the air, the plants and the fields. As much as he spun tales of robbers and kings, weddings and wars, he also used seeds, water, earth, to embody the compassion of God for all creation as he taught and healed and saved his people. He himself stood in the Wisdom tradition, an inheritor of the wandering truth teller that has nowhere to lay her head.

"How great is the freedom to which you were called" (Esther de Waal p 41) wrote Benedict in his rule, the rule by which Ethelburga lived.

Echoes of the Sufi mystic poet Rumi who taught: "Why when the world is so big, did you fall asleep in a prison of all places"? We are expert at surrounding ourselves with intellectual or emotional scaffolding that reduces our view of the vast sky and the possibilities for understanding that we have.

I feel as if I have learned something by listening to James Lovelock today. He has been hailed by the New Scientist magazine as one of the great thinkers of our time. This wholly new perspective has the force of unlocking some of the doors in our hearts and minds. And in this city of London, it is our folly and our downfall that we seriously believe we can continue as we are. Sustainable retreat from our over consumption, not sustainable development of the whole planet, is what he advocates. It is something that Ethelburga would have understood in her seventh century agrarian economic community.

In this sassy urban and toxic environment, where we search for the plants pushing up the paving stones, we are called in the spirit of Ethelburga the Benedictine abbess, to listen for the Wisdom of the ages and to recognise the strong feminine voice in our midst that reminds us who we are, to whom we are called, and to whom we must return. Amen.