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The FURROW

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Tanya Jones

Heart, Hands
and Voice

– *living out Laudato Si'*

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I think I'll always remember, as vividly as I remember anything, that moment four years ago when the newly elected pope announced that he was taking the name Francis. I was hovering in the doorway, conscious of something I needed to get back to in the kitchen, but I stopped, and my eyes started tingling and then they were filled with tears of joy and hope.

Laudato Si', for me and probably thousands of others, is the tangible delivery of that moment's promise. It is of course an invaluable addition to the corpus of Catholic social teaching, but it is also much more than that. It is, I believe, one of the most important, in the true sense prophetic, documents of our time, and it is for all of us. Pope Francis writes, quite deliberately that he 'would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common homes' (3) and it is in that spirit that all people are invited to answer. We won't all agree with everything that the encyclical contains, with every aspect of the Pope's analysis or with all the links he makes with traditional Catholic teaching. That's okay. I don't think he wrote this just as another chunk of the magisterium, a deposit of faith to be stored in the Vatican archives. No, this is a letter, a real letter to his sisters and brothers across the world, inviting us to listen and to speak, to read and to respond.

So what should our response be? On one level, of course, it is an intellectual assent, a response of the head if you like, a process of reading and understanding, of following up the scientific observations that Francis makes, of fact-checking, of doing our own research, of keeping up to date with what has changed and what is still the same. That's the right place to begin. We need to recognise reality before we can hope to change it.

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But too often we end there. Maybe we think that's enough, that believing the right things alone will bring about some kind of ecological salvation. Maybe we know that we have to do more, but feel unprepared for it, and imagine that we need to arm ourselves better before striding into battle. (Non-violent battle, of course.) I've certainly made that mistake myself. 'I'll just read this book; I'll just check out this website; I'll just reply to this comment.' And the book leads to another book, the website to another website, and the comment to an endless and pointless debate with someone who will never be convinced.

Trust yourself. Trust the science. When it comes to climate change, which is the main focus of so-called debates, the vast majority of climate scientists are in agreement. You don't have to know the rebuttals to the nonsensical claims of the naysayers. The people and organisations behind them aren't interested in real discussion anyway. 'Doubt is our product' is still their motto and confusion and delay are still their objectives. If you come across someone who seems genuinely unaware of the consensus, point them towards the Skeptical Science website and move on.

As a writer, I'm not going to advise you not to read. But don't make reading the only thing that you do. Use what you read to inform, to enliven, to deepen and to propel the rest of your response. Put your head at the service of your heart, of your hands and of your voice.

Because those, I think, are the responses that really make a difference, that turn us into active participants in the urgent and vital work that's being done. Your heart, as the mindful source of all that you do. Your hands, making your daily life part of the solution instead of the problem. And your voice, boldly speaking truth to power.

I don't do any of those very well. There are many people here in this room who pray better, live better and speak with greater courage. I'm just the messenger here, and I'm talking to myself as much as to anyone else.

OUR HEART

I'll begin with the heart. Not so much for the philosophical or theological reasons that the clergy here would be able to explain, but for a very practical one. Activism is hard. It can be hard in terms of time, energy and resources, but it's also hard on a deeper level. The work, the task of protecting our earth and all that lives on it, of helping the poor to find justice, of changing systems and changing minds, is a gargantuan one. There is so much to do, there are so few, it sometimes seems, doing it, there are so few even listening, and there is so little time.

Any of you who have been canvassing before an election will know the experience: you approach a front door. Through the window you catch a glimpse, though you try not to look, of people sitting in front of the TV screen. You ring the doorbell. You knock. And no one comes. Sometimes it feels as though our whole lives are like that, as though we're knocking and knocking until our knuckles are sore and our hearts are sorer, but there's something shiny or squabbling on the screen and no one wants to get off the sofa.

It's easy to feel discouraged, disappointed, depressed. And it's almost inevitable, if that discouragement persists, to grow bitter and-cynical. Probably we've all met people to whom that's happened, people who've tried too hard with too little, whose commitment has grown tall and leafy but withered in the harsh light of the world's indifference.

We need roots. Our activities and our activism need to be embedded deeply in who we are, and our commitment needs constant replenishment, food and water for the tired soul. Our friends, family, colleagues and comrades can do much, and I'm perpetually grateful for the generous inspiration of my Green network, but they can't give us all we need, not if they're to flourish themselves.

The spirituality I'm talking about isn't restricted to Catholics, to Christians, to those who think of themselves as religious or even those who believe in God. For some it is compatible with the most orthodox and traditional doctrine and religious practice. For many it is not, and even as we identify passages in our sacred books that cherish creation and advocate for the poor, we become more intensely aware of the often violent pathology of the God who is portrayed there.

There is no one right answer. If this work is what was traditionally called a 'vocation', then some are called to do it within, and some outside the church, some in the context of other faiths, some with an assurance of a Creator, some with the firm conviction that no such being exists, and many in the wide and rich terrain of uncertainty and exploration.

Language can get in the way, exaggerating the spaces between us, but changes in the way we use it can build unexpected bridges. Moves away from gendered, parochial and anthropomorphic concepts of 'God the Father' to more universal descriptions such as 'the ground of our being', can free us, as can a simple experiment in switching pronouns. Try referring to God as 'she' for a while, and see what insights that brings you.

A spirituality of the earth, for the poor, rooted in non-violence and welling up in compassion can be practised in as many ways

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as we are individuals. For some the core will be sacramental acts, for some communal acts of worship, for others the silence of meditation and mindfulness, for some a contemplative immersion in the natural world around us. And we're not restricted to the one we grew up in, or the one we found helpful ten, twenty, even fifty years ago. The spiritual aspects of an awareness of our common home are developing as much as the science, and in the light of the same questions: what is true? what is helpful? what works?

There are those who have gone ahead, not least Francis and Clare of Assisi themselves, but not so many that the paths are clear. Most belonged to times of less urgency, when it seemed sufficient to appreciate and to conserve, and when the threats we faced were smaller in scale and extent. It is up to us to play our part, not only in reaching out but in burrowing deep, finding the place in our hearts where what we believe, how we live and how we love are all aspects of the same reality. To the extent that we see 'the environment' as an autonomous entity, separate from ourselves, one another and our concept of God, we are not yet there. I'm certainly not yet there. And if environmental awareness is an extra thing, bolted onto our spirituality, our daily lives or our politics, it will someday or other fall off. Jesus said something about new wine and old wineskins

And he also said that if we were ready to give we could expect to receive. 'A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over.' I believe that is true for us here and now, however we would define our beliefs. The resources of grace aren't limited or monopolised. Take what you need, and you will need it. Drink deeply, for the more you give yourself, the more you will have to give.

OUR HANDS

Let's move to our hands. I'm not going to say much about this, because so much has already been said and written. A few years ago especially there was a spate of 'green lifestyle' books, including some from a specifically Christian perspective. I'm not sure that they achieved all that much except to boost the recycled paper industry and to generate a lot of unfocused guilt. It is not the fault of ordinary people living ordinary lives that we are in this mess, and there are two big problems with pretending that it is.

Firstly, people get inspired (which of course is a good thing) but then they try to make changes in their lives that aren't practical and which they can't sustain. Then they get disheartened, feel guilty and end up with a simmering resentment towards the whole idea of environmental action.

Secondly, even if we can make sustainable changes, we can't

solve the big problems by individual action or inaction. And the idea that we can, lets governments, corporations and the very rich disastrously off the hook. Earth Hour, which I participated in for some years, is a kind of encapsulation of that; people sitting alone or in tiny groups in the dark, repenting of their eco-sins and counting the minutes until they can get back to real life again. Nothing works better to play into the hands of those who want to present environmentalists as judgemental killjoys.

So is there any point in changing our lifestyles at all? I believe that there is, for two big reasons. Firstly, what you do with your hands is linked intimately with what you experience in your heart and what you say with your voice.

If we are praying, meditating, holding in our hearts the earth and its inhabitants, then thoughtlessly turn the heating up instead of getting a jumper; if we take a mindful walk in the woods and then drive home too fast in a gas-guzzling monster; if we come home from our Sunday eco-service to stuff ourselves with cereal-fed beef or hormone-stuffed chicken, then sooner or later that contradiction is going to tell. One or other will have to give way. Either our hands will drop a little of what they are clutching, or our hearts will turn a little colder.

And if we turn up at a climate change demo in our Chelsea tractors, or serve at our campaign meeting tea and coffee that come from exploitative sources, we can't blame onlookers for questioning our sincerity. And how can we lobby our government or council for better public transport if we've never been on a bus?

Secondly, though a change in our individual lives cannot be a solution in itself, it can be a part of the solution. 'Be the change you want to see,' may be a cliché, but it's good advice at every level. Those carbon emissions that haven't happened because you've changed something may not be statistically significant, but they add up, together with those saved by thousands of others. And some of those others will be inspired by your actions, as long as they are carried out with cheerfulness, humility and a healthy sense of the ridiculous. Compost loos are intrinsically funny, and nothing is more off-putting than a pompous insistence that they aren't.

Others, people you don't know and who don't know you, will be enabled to make changes in their own lives because of your small investment in positive alternatives, the perceived demand that's swelled by your participation and the improvements that are facilitated by your acting as a guinea-pig in the first stages of a new idea.

So our own lifestyle, I'd suggest, shouldn't be the focus of our environmental concern, but should be, so far as we can reasonably make it, quietly consistent with what we believe and what we say.

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It's often couched in terms of don'ts, but the only don't I would recommend is: Don't expect to be perfect. Take small steps, start where you are and join with others. Grand schemes of isolated self-sufficiency aren't nearly as effective as living modestly in your community.

In practical terms, the main areas you might want to look at are how we use power, heat and water; how we travel and what we eat. Of those, the easiest to change, and the one with arguably the greatest effect is what we eat. Again, small steps may be wisest. Don't take a vow of eternal veganism if you're likely to fall at the first ham sandwich. This isn't about punishing ourselves. Often it's simply about taking a step back to think about what we're doing and maybe remembering when we used to do it differently. Thirty years ago, for those of you who can remember that far back, would you have used the car for that trip, kept the radiators on over that night, eaten that much of that sort of meat?

There's one other major area you can look at, and this one straddles the lifestyle and the activist responses. Look at where your money is. Whether you have investments, large or small, and that includes your bank accounts, whether you benefit from a pension fund, or whether you're a member of a church, political party, union or any other large organisation, you have the power to make a great difference. Divestment, especially from fossil fuels, is the great campaigning movement of the moment, and we can all become a part of it.

ACTIVISM

Which leads me to the final facet of our response: activism. It's a slightly scary word. I remember the first time that I was described as an activist, by a Friend of the Earth to his mother, and I half looked around to see who he was talking about. Since I'd just pretended to shoot him in front of Belfast City Hall as part of a flashmob drama, I perhaps shouldn't have been so surprised.

You won't be astonished to find out, as I did while preparing this talk, that there are vast plains of debate about what exactly activism is, and whether everyone who does it is an activist. And I hope you won't be disappointed to find out that I'm not going to go there. For the purposes of the next few minutes, activism means using your voice, your influence, to bring about certain kinds of change, and activists are all of us who do that.

What kinds of change are we talking about? Changes to social, economic, corporate and political structures, changes in policy and changes in direction.

Quite often, especially in environmental activism, what we're seeking is a change to a change, a U-turn if you like, a decision

not to carry on along a ‘business as usual’ pathway but to restore a habitat to a previous, healthier state. We could be concentrating on the global, the national, the regional or the local. Not really the personal. If you persuade your next-door neighbour not to cut down his tree, then unless he’s a major landowner or a corporation, you’re probably not really an activist. Perhaps you shouldn’t ask him what he would call you.

And in what direction do we want that change to be? I long ago lost count of the number of little lectures I’ve heard, usually from men standing in their driveways, about how the Greens would be all right if they’d only ‘stick to Green issues’ by which they seem to mean litter and a little light recycling. The provision of brown bins should really have made our existence redundant. But instead, there we still are, banging on about Trident and tax havens. Why?

Let’s go back to Francis. To the two Francises. As the Pope writes of the saint:

He loved, and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his open-heartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace. (10)

Concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society and interior peace. If we open out, as I believe both the saint and the pope would, the phrase ‘interior peace’ to include the exterior peace of non-violence, those are the four principles which guide the political movement of which I am a member. That’s not a coincidence. We can’t have a clean environment amidst the pollution of war. We can’t have peace while we have the violence of extreme exploitation and inequality. We can’t dismantle that oppression without democratic and accountable structures and processes. And we can’t expect people to take part in that decision making if they cannot safely eat, drink and breathe. We need, says Francis, to listen to both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.

So, what do we do, and where do we start? Who can hear our voice?

I may need to make a quick apology here, to any of you who came along in the hope of getting an hour or two’s respite from politics. At least you’ll miss the canvassers. But there’s probably one thing worse than having too many elections, and that’s not having enough. I’m acutely aware that the interplay of faith and religious identity with politics has not always had a beneficial

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effect either on the individuals concerned or on society. However, it remains the case that the kinds of change we are talking about can be at least facilitated if not fully achieved, by elected governments at various levels. We are in the realm of policy, however distant it may seem, and it's a tragedy that the intersection of faith and politics here is largely limited to matters of sexuality, reproduction and educational structures, while wider questions of justice, peace and sustainability are left prey to the dominant forces of money, accumulated power and violence.

So, you can vote, and in the circumstances, I'm not going to say any more about that now. But you can also hold your political representatives to account in between elections. What have they done? How have they voted? If their party has been in government, has it acted to bring about a fairer, cleaner, more hopeful future? If it has been in opposition, has it used that position to call for the changes that are needed, to co-operate when the government has done the right thing and to make reasoned, principled arguments when it hasn't. In either case, has it sought to build a consensus so that it will be easier for its successors to act for the common good? Those manifestos shouldn't really be chucked out at the end of the election along with the broken cable ties. They are the parties' maps. If they show the right destination, you need to check that they're still on the road. If they're going somewhere you don't want to go, you need to pipe up, like Granny in the back seat, and tell them so.

But of course there is more to do than just electoral politics. So much, in fact, that it's easy to be overwhelmed. So many worthy causes, so little time. Don't panic. You can't do everything, and you don't have to. There are seven billion of us left to share out the work, even if five hundred million are still on the sofa. Be aware of what's happening, read the little stories in the margins and follow up the ones that catch your heart. If you belong to a faith tradition, your familiar development agency may be a good place to start: Christian Aid, Trócaire, Tear Fund and many others do a huge amount of actually quite radical campaigning stuff. Bombard David Thomas of Christian Aid, and tell him I sent you. If you prefer to stay secular, look at what War on Want are doing, at 350.org, at Friends of the Earth. If non-violence is the thread that tugs at your thoughts, find out about *Pax Christi*, the Peace Pledge Union, CND. Amidst all the reasons to grumble about the internet, it's a wonderful opportunity to link people who care with the information, the companions and the tools that they need.

And when you've found your cause or causes, what do you do then? 'Clicktivism' is a contemptuous word, especially used by election candidates with bulging inboxes, but signing online

petitions, sharing information and asking public figures where they stand, are all important. Don't stop doing that, just because it doesn't feel like much. There are many good people who owe their lives and liberty to online activism.

But it's more effective, as well as more fun, if you do something else as well. It's not a bad policy, in campaigning as well as the rest of your life, sometimes to do something that scares you. One of mine was taking part last year in an Art Not Oil action at the Ulster Museum when BP were sponsoring an exhibition. My job was to distract the security guard while others unrolled a picture of an oil-soaked seabird and gave a short speech about Deepwater Horizon. After the initial terror - was I going to be locked up for life? - the experience was not only hugely rewarding - many of the visitors and staff agreed with us and we were applauded as we processed down 'the stairways but also a very funny memory. In retrospect it does have its Ealing comedy aspect, and it never does to take yourself too seriously.

But I'm not underestimating the scale of what we face. In the two years since *Laudato Si'* was published, there haven't been all that many moments of hope. One, just a few months later, was of course the reaching of the Paris agreement on climate change. I was there in the city, with Friends of the Earth, taking part in symbolic actions, linking up with track-free campaigners from across the world and finding a corner of Sacré Coeur to kneel for a few moments and pray for another peace.

There was one demonstration, the Red Line, which the police had banned, and so each of us had to examine our consciences to decide what was the right thing for us to do. I was pondering the question, when a text came through from my youngest child, Ashley, then eighteen. 'Don't worry,' it said, 'but I'm part of the Fossil Free occupation of the finance office at Queen's.' Ashley was there for a lot longer than I was in Paris, and in a lot less comfort than our dormitory. At one stage we wondered whether we'd have to send Christmas dinner up to the window in a basket, but eventually the university agreed to review its investment policy, and they came home.

That story had a happy ending, with a confirmation a couple of weeks ago that Queen's is divesting from fossil fuels. But the Paris agreement has of course this week been struck a devastating blow by Donald's Trump's latest announcement.

We live in excruciatingly interesting times. It's not an exaggeration to say that the fate of the world as we love and cherish it is hanging in the balance. We are, each of us, urgently called to respond, with care, compassion, courage and what my hero John Dear calls 'meticulous non-violence'.

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I've almost finished, but I'm aware that there's one area of response that I haven't covered, probably because it doesn't fit neatly into any of the heart, hands voice categories that I've used. It can really be all three. I'm talking about practical action, doing things that change the world a little in themselves but also form part of that great cry for the earth and for the poor. And they nurture our spirits as well. Yours could be anything from planting yellow rattle seeds as part of Ulster Wildlife's Magnificent Meadows project to building homes for the homeless across the world. Whatever it is, doing something tangible, with your own body, can be a wonderful way of grounding yourself as well as making a real difference for others.

I'll end with a few more words from *Laudato Si'*. For me, these summarise not only what we should do, in response to what we've read, but why, if we genuinely listen to our deepest urgings, we will naturally find ourselves doing it. Francis says:

'For all our limitations, gestures of generosity, solidarity and care cannot but well up within us, since we were made for love.'
(58)

That love, or whatever synonym we use for it: grace, compassion, mercy, justice, is why we are here. It is why *Laudato Si'* was written, and why we continue to respond to it. Each of us, in our own way, with our heart, our hands and our voice, can keep that love lit right through the darkness. Thank you for doing just that.

The future. The future does not exist until it happens. And we are the ones who make it happen. The future is neither a blank page nor is it an already designed house into which we are required to move. The future is what we build together, what we create together. Nor is it implemented in one deft and intelligent stroke. It occurs only at each moment, with the next move we make. And that can be original brainwave, or obdurate repetition of mistakes already made. We can become ugly, vulgar extensions of what we already are; or we can expand towards what we are being invited to become.

– MARK PATRICK HEDERMAN, *The Opal and the Pearl*, (Dublin: Columba Press) p. 11.