

## APPENDIX 4

### THE LAND IN TRAVAIL, AND RENEWED: COMMENTS ON ROMANS 8

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Because of our cultural background and historical experiences, certain Bible passages mean a great deal to us. One such passage is Romans 8, especially verses 19–23. This speaks of the whole of creation groaning in travail, suffering with the people, awaiting the freedom which God brings.

Paul here speaks of the whole creation in agony and eagerly longing for salvation. In the past, many missionaries have spoken as if God is only interested in certain individuals, to pluck them out of the world. They tried to teach us that God is not interested in this world, but only in some other spiritual realm elsewhere. Aboriginal people always found this hard to believe. We always knew that individuals cannot be separated from the social group of which they are a part. And people cannot be separated from the land and nature in which they live. Many of our ceremonies celebrate the joy and mystery of life and the inter-connectedness of all things. We see God at work all around us, giving life to the land, animals, plants and people. How can God not be interested in this world? It is God's world. God created it and the signs of God's presence are all around us.

The whole creation belongs to God, not just certain individuals, not just some racial or cultural groups, not

just humanity, but the whole creation — social, physical and spiritual!

Paul tells us that the creation is groaning in travail. We know only too well the suffering of our people since the invasion of Australia. But the land also suffers. Our forefathers had laws and ceremonies about caring for the land. They knew that land is sacred and that people belong to the land.

The Europeans did not know the law and the ceremonies of the land. They brought in many plants and animals from Europe and elsewhere which hurt and destroyed God's wonderful creation here in Australia. They brought in farming methods from Europe which also destroyed God's creation. We see white people killing the land and plants and animals with bulldozers, bushfires, erosion and sometimes killing for no reason — they do not even eat what they kill. Our spirits groan — and the land groans, too.

Our people were appointed custodians and caretakers by the Creator Spirit, but in many places we cannot carry out our responsibilities any more. Others have taken over control without knowing the law of the land. We groan because the land suffers and the land groans because we suffer. Our people are exploited because of the greed and ignorance of others. The land is also exploited because of their greed and ignorance. The people and the land are victims of sin.

The narrow theologies which restrict God's interest and salvation to individual humans do not help us. But Paul in chapter 8 of Romans helps us to see that

we, as well as the land, are under the bondage of sin and suffering. Paul also affirms that the land aches for salvation and freedom, just as we do. We see Christ suffering in our people who have been separated from their land, who are paupers on the fringes of Australian society, and whose spirits continue to be crushed through the taunts and stereotypes of others. And we also see Christ suffering in the land, which is hurting and damaged as we are.

Paul helps us to theologise our personal experience of exploitation and pain, as well as the exploitation and pain of the land.

But then Paul goes further. He sees the pain as the birth-pangs of a new beginning. Christ not only suffered; he also rose victorious over pain and evil and death. God's love and renewal comes to us in the midst of our suffering and the suffering of the land, and then brings the whole creation to a new liberation in Christ. As Paul puts it: 'The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (8:21). The whole creation: people, animals, trees, the land and the seas, the spiritual realm — all will experience a new birth.

We who have the Spirit of Christ know this to be true, because we already experience a measure of that new birth, our new creation here and now (8:23). The whole of Paul's chapter affirms this new creation. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ (8:1). The Spirit of Life sets us free (8:2). The Spirit gives life and peace (8:6). We have hope (8:24)!

For us, the Spirit of Life is the Rainbow Spirit revealed in Christ and now rising again in Christ to free the land from its bondage. For us, the Rainbow Spirit, who has suffered in Christ, is now rising again to free our people.

And so we look forward to the time when once again we will be able to cooperate with the Creator-Spirit to be custodians of the land. With God, we long for the time when the land is once again properly cared for and is fruitful. Its bondage will be over and the land, too, will rejoice with us and worship the Creator Spirit!

Even though we have been dispossessed of our lands, even though our life-giving spiritual tradition has been dismissed as idle fairy tales, even though our supportive extended family structure has been denigrated as primitive, even though our spirits have been crushed as we have internalised what others have said about us, we can still stand confident and bold and declare with Paul: 'If God is for us, who can be against us?' (8:31).

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come . . . nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38–39, NRSV)

Come, Lord Jesus, and renew your whole creation!  
Come, Rainbow Spirit, and rise again from our land and free it from bondage.