

Friday Evening Message – 3 July 2020

The Land to Life Again

During the last months my husband and I have been isolating in our little Norfolk village. We are blessed to have a garden to walk in and we know how lucky we are. We have watched winter become spring become summer. Because of the lack of traffic and movement the wildlife here has been richer than we have ever seen it. The land has truly come to life again. Will it remain so when the world goes back to normal? Or can we dare to hope that we might build a new normal?

Usually in July we would be in a cottage in a tiny hamlet in the south of Tuscany, but not this year. Iris Origo was an Anglo-American writer who lived most of her long life near to this Italian hamlet. During World War II she kept a remarkable diary detailing life in her Tuscan home, first under Italian fascism and then under German occupation. When the Germans sequestered her beautiful home, in the valley of the River Orcia, she buried the diary in the garden. After the Allied victory she returned to the house and dug up the diary. It was published as "War in the Val d'Orcia" to great acclaim in 1946. A few years ago a Jewish-Italian composer, Francesco Cilluffo, turned small parts of her diary into a song cycle for soprano and cello. It was premiered in the courtyard of Origo's home and the cellist was her grandson. The piece has the title, from Origo's own words: "The Land to Life Again." Its theme is how a valley and its people, devastated by war, are gradually nurtured back to life by hard work and love.

Cilluffo's work reminds us how poetry and song may distill a long and weighty message into a few stark and powerful words. Towards the end of the Torah Moses entreats the Israelites to open their ears and to listen to his song. Standing on the edge of the land, which is to be their eternal homeland, he sings of what was and what will yet be. With a few deft strokes he paints a picture of a people rescued by God, who then turn their back on God, only to be rescued by God once again. And then he entrusts the people with his song, telling them to pass it on to their children, as a reminder of God's Teaching, God's Torah. Moses knew that long passages of prose, however beautiful, are hard to remember, but songs may echo in our ears and our hearts forever.

The Torah that they must observe is inextricably tied to the land in which they will live. It is only by observing God's Torah, says Moses, that they will long endure in this old-new land. Moses may not have been the first leader to tie a people to a land, but here at the end of the Torah he puts forcefully into the human mind the archetype of the land that is loved, lost, longed for and finally reborn. Origo had such a relationship with the valley that she first saw in the 1920s and which seemed to be lost in the 1940s. She devoted her life to protecting and then re-building the lives of its people and their ancient landscape.

Far from the Val d'Orcia and Israel, in London's Camden, Frank Auerbach has been painting the urban landscape in which he lives for over sixty years. His great works date from the 1950s and 60s, when he painted the bomb sites of London and showed how the land came back to life again. His parents had been murdered by the Nazis. He survived because as a child he was sent to England on the Kindertransport, his journey and care paid for by a then little known writer, Iris Origo.

Origo probably knew little of the song of Moses. But she lived its ancient plea to rebuild our promised lands as decent places, where God's teaching enters our ears and is carried out through the work of our hands. When our present crisis is history, may we look back and know that we took advantage of an enforced pause to make necessary changes, so that the land will always have life for the generations yet to come. May our

descendants sing of a time when the world, devastated by disease, came to life again as a greener place, filled with respect for the environment and justice for all who live here.

Shabbat shalom,

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