

In Earth as It Is in Heaven:



Image- from an original photo at sunrise, Loch Avon, Cairngorms, David Coleman

An Ecotheological Reflection, reimagining “Kingdom”, by Rev Professor June Boyce-Tillman

What do we mean when we pray “Your Kingdom come” in today’s world? For many, the word *kingdom* evokes hierarchy, domination, and power imposed from above.

Yet the prayer itself appears to gesture towards something radically different: a vision of life shaped not by control but by right relationship, mutuality, and shared flourishing. Increasingly, theologians and communities are reframing “kingdom” as *kindom*—a non-hierarchical, relational understanding of divine life in which power is diffused, not concentrated, and living is understood as fundamentally interconnection.

This essay explores that vision through the lens of **ecotheology**, drawing especially on the work of the twelfth-century mystic Hildegard of Bingen, alongside scripture, poetry, hymnody, indigenous wisdom, and contemporary ecological insight. At its heart is a simple but demanding claim that *God is revealed in restoring and maintaining relationship not only between human beings, but also with all the other-than human world*. To pray “in earth as it is in heaven”¹ is to recognise the world as God’s body, creation as sacramental, and humanity as participants—not masters—in an unfolding, sacred ecology. Christian theology has often privileged scripture as the primary revelation of God. Ecotheology insists on a necessary reordering: **creation itself is the first Divine revelation**, scripture the second.

Few Christian thinkers have articulated this vision as powerfully as **Hildegard of Bingen**. Living in the context of the twelfth century, Hildegard explored a theology deeply rooted in the living processes of the earth. Central to her thought is the concept of *viriditas*—greening power—the life force that animates all creation. For Hildegard, God is not distant or static but dynamically involved

¹ 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* “Thy wyll be done **in earth** as it is in heaven,” reflecting the *Tyndale Bible* (1526).

in the processes of the world's becoming. She understood the Holy Spirit as *anima mundi*, the soul of the world, continually breathing life into soil, water, plants, animals, and human bodies alike. Creation is not completed; it is continuously being birthed. This vision stands in sharp contrast to later theological developments that separated spirit from matter, heaven from earth, and humanity from the rest of creation. Hildegard's cosmology assumes interdependence. Human health, social justice, and ecological balance are inseparable. Sin then becomes a disruption of right relationship within the whole vibrating web of life.

Ecotheology challenges the notion of the world as inert matter available for exploitation. Instead, it invites us to see the earth as **God's body**—alive, communicative, and deserving of reverence. Just as the creator is loving creation, so creation is responding in love. This perspective dissolves the rigid boundary between animate and inanimate. Indigenous traditions have long maintained that trees, rivers, and landscapes are alive with meaning and agency. Western culture, shaped by Enlightenment rationalism and industrialisation, has largely lost the capacity to listen or respond to the earth.

Poet Mary Oliver captures this revelatory quality of nature with striking clarity. Standing among broken shells and scattered remnants on the shore, she discovers not chaos but language—a “schoolhouse of little words.” Meaning emerges slowly, attentively, through learning to read the whole story from what appear to be isolated fragments. Creation reveals a relational God engaging in the process of patient, loving attentiveness.

The ecological crisis can be understood in spiritual terms. When the earth is reduced to resource, right relationship is replaced by processes such as extraction and abuse. Justice, in this sense, is ecological - **right relationship** within the whole community of life - not primarily punitive but restorative. It is about repairing damaged relationships—between humans, between humanity and the earth, and between creating and the Divine. Human institutions—governments, economies, legal systems—are part of this process. They bear responsibility for nurturing conditions in which life can flourish. Difficult decisions about control, order, and restraint need to be guided by wisdom rather than greed, by care rather than domination. The measure of justice is whether the web of life is strengthened or diminished.

Kindom is a way of living rooted in kinship rather than domination. Kinship here extends beyond blood or species. It includes soil, air, animals, plants, rivers, oceans, ancestors, the as-yet-unborn and the galaxies. This vision challenges the myth of human exceptionalism. It asks us to decentre ourselves and recognise that our well-being is intimately bound up with the well-being of the world. Child care, community, education, legal structures and worship all become sites for re-learning and re-thinking connectedness. Practices that reconnect humankind with the environment —through farming and gardening, musicking, dancing, story-telling and revising, painting and sculpting, ritual making, and embodied experience—are not simply luxuries. They are essential for personal and planetary health. They are crucial and essential to our journey into God.

Examples

BREAKAGE by Mary Oliver

I go down to the edge of the sea.
How everything shines in the morning light!
The cusp of the whelk,

the broken cupboard of the clam,
the opened, blue mussels,
moon snails, pale pink and barnacle scarred—
and nothing at all whole or shut, but tattered, split,
dropped by the gulls onto the gray rocks and all the moisture gone.
It's like a schoolhouse
of little words,
thousands of words.
First you figure out what each one means by itself,
the jingle, the periwinkle, the scallop
full of moonlight.

Then you begin, slowly, to read the whole story.

HYMNS by June Boyce-Tillman

TUNE: Golden Sheaves

1. To thee, O Lord, our hearts we raise
In hymns of adoration;
To thee bring crafted songs of praise
With shouts of exultation.
Bright robes of gold the fields adorn;
The hills with joy are ringing;
The valleys stand so thick with corn
That even they are singing.

2. We gaze into Your fertile earth
And see Your creatures working –
Regeneration in the dirt,
The Holy Spirit birthing.
The soil is the human ground –
Society's foundation,
The dark of God, a fire profound,
The basis of creation.

3. We long for right relationship,
Enfleshed in earthy greening,
With animals and shining fish
Enlightening and dark'ning.
Compassion lives within our hearts
For peace and justice searching -
Requiring all Your skilful arts
For heavening and earthing

4. And now, on this our festal day,
Thy bounteous hand confessing,
Upon thine altar, Lord, we lay

The first-fruits of thy blessing;
By thee, our souls are being fed
With gifts of grace supernal;
From fertile fields comes daily bread,
Our route to bread eternal.

To the tune *Golden sheaves* by Arthur Sullivan (1942-1900)

Words by June Boyce-Tillman based on the original by William Chatterton Dix (1837-1898). Verses 1 and 4 are adapted by June Boyce-Tillman from his original. Verses 2 and 3 are by June Boyce-Tillman and based on The Rev Dr Terry Biddington's *Dirty Theology*.

JUSTICE as RIGHT RELATION

Tune: Thaxted

1. Within th' encircling planets God's Spirit gently flows,
Restoring right connection through which creation grows;
With subtle understanding God takes each tiny part
And makes them fit together within a wounded heart.
We pray you, vibrant Spirit, infuse our hearts today
That we may act within You and understand Your Way.
2. The joy of right relationship the cosmos can inbreathe,
As You encircle all things and lovingly re-weave
The strands of human living. The joy, disputes and pain
Are taken and re-woven to make life flow again;
And we are called to do Your work and make the weaving fair,
Reflect Your deep transforming love infusing all our care.
3. Our human institutions, our politics, our wealth
Bear fruit in justice-making to serve a nation's health;
The difficult decisions – to nurture and control –
The maintenance of order and all that is involved
Take place within Your Wisdom still making all things new;
We ask that Your amazing grace will fill all we pursue.

June Boyce-Tillman March 19th 2007.

I decided on the tune THAXTED by Gustav Holst, originally the main tune for Jupiter from the Planets Suite. This is well known for the words 'I vow to thee my country'. These words are loved by many and viewed as problematic by many others. It was written for my friend Dr Carolyn Boulter as the High Sheriff, for a service concerned with justice and justice making.

HYMN: WALK THE ROAD To the tune SLANE

1. Walk on the long road, the long suffering road

A man goes before us; he carries a load;
Thorns cut his forehead; the Sun burns the sky;
A child watches closely and is still asking why.

2. Circle me gently with love's flutt'ring wings;
Enfold me in glory until my heart sings
Nurturing beauty, you hold me secure
And drench me with water until I am pure.
3. Bird song at daybreak and night clouds at dusk,
The moon's gentle glistening, the scent of sweet musk
Remind us that your care cannot let us go;
We sail in our small boats along with your flow.
4. Christ at the centre and going before,
That Christ in confusion will open a door;
Christ in the present and Christ in the past
And Christ underpinning the course of life's path
5. This is a tale of a love without end,
Traversing the pleasures and pains that life sends;
You live within us; we can feel that power
Which binds up our wounding and makes our lives flower.

June Boyce-Tillman Feb 25th 2016

SONG THE OVERARCHING SKY

1. We exist beneath the sky, The overarching sky,
Divinity in majesty, So deep and yet so high.
1. The enfolding of the air, The overarching air
Fills creatures with their liveliness, The tree, the sea, the bear.
2. The descending of the sun, The overarching light
To violent death at cruel hands, Adds deep'ning to our night.
3. At the dawn new life springs up , The overarching life,
Like seed that springs from darkest earth, Sets hoping love alight.
4. Like the eagle of the hills, The overarching hills,

We soar within God's strengthening, So fast and yet so still.
5. Bring the elders from the past, The overarching past.

Through Wisdom through experience, Please guide us to the last.

6. Come, intensity of love, An overarching love,
That holds all in its mystery, Speak softly like a dove.

7. So we stand beneath the sky, The overarching sky,
Connecting power of ev'rything. In God's own arms we lie.

June Boyce-Tillman Florence March 2012 Based on a native American song from the Pawnee people.

GARDEN HYMN - To the tune FOR THE BEAUTY OF THE EARTH

1. Jesus walking through the vines,
Mary using herbs for meals,
Prophets using plants as signs –
All show nature's power to heal.

CHORUS:

*Earth reveals God's loving care
So in justice may we share.*

2. Radiant star of Bethlehem,
Wipe away Our Lady's tears;
Sage from old Jerusalem,
Gently touch our present fears.

CHORUS

3. Gilead supplies the balm
Which can soothe the angry breast;
Mary's Mantle wraps us calm,
While Verbena brings us rest.

CHORUS

4. Burning Bush revives God's call,
So in pain we don't forget
Wormwood mingling with the gall
Helping us to honour death.

CHORUS

5. Purging Hyssop, make us pure;
Weeping Willow, help us cry;
May the Flax Oil be our cure,

Christ's Thorns prick us into life.

CHORUS

6. Jacob's ladder we invoke
So that vision's way is clear.
Dreaming held in Joseph's Coat
Brings encircling Wisdom near.
CHORUS

June Boyce-Tillman for the Bible garden at Whitelands College, Roehampton University.
July 27th 2006 using plant names from that garden.

CLIMATE SONG (To the tunes Kingsfold + Dem Bones)

1. The muddy dirty fertile earth and the glistening drops of rain,
The sunlight filtering through the trees and all the air sustains
Flow with the Spirit's liveliness - God's creativity,
Reveal the world's relatedness – God's connectivity.

CHORUS

For the mushroom's connected with the tree trunk,
And the tree trunk's connected with the bird song,
And the bird song's connected with the warm heart.
Oh, hear the word of the Lord!

2. The beetle scurrying on the lawn, the seed that breaks beneath,
The bee that seeks the gaudy flower, the honey that we seek
Form part of our humanity; without them we will die.
God calls us to a reverence for all our planet's life.

CHORUS

For the mushroom's connected with the tree trunk,
And the tree trunk's connected with the bird song,
And the bird song's connected with the warm heart.
Oh, hear the word of the Lord!

Written for Myrna Goedluck and Bishop Martin's Pilgrimage by June Boyce-Tillman on
February 24th 2024.

PERICHORESIS To the tune Greensleeves

1. The hope goes round,
And the strength goes round
And the power goes round
And the love goes round;

And three are one
In a circling dance
That embraces the growing of Gaia.

This infuses with rainbow ribbons
The earth, the sky and the deep abyss;
All are entangled and all are entwining
Creating the loom of creating..

2. For God, our God
Is a welcoming God,
And a strength'ning God
And a vulnerable God;
And God, our God
Is continually weaving,
The warp and the weft of the cosmos.

As we dance in the cosmic circle
We play our part in the turning loom
None are outside of the dance of trinity;
Three in the one ness of Gaia.

June Boyce-Tillman May 27th 2020

HYMN ON WONDER to the tune ALL FOR JESUS by Stainer

1. In the earth, the warmth, the water,
Airy blessing from the sky,
Flowers wake up and blossoms spring up
Bringing us both power and life.

2. Awe and wonder and thanksgiving
For such holy sacred gifts
Mirror Love's divine creating
As the fertile Spirit lifts.

3. We surrender to that loving
Glistening through this sacred place;
When we look into its deepening
We behold God's awesome face.

June Boyce-Tillman April 2023

WISDOM to St Gertrude (Onward Christian Soldiers)

Wisdom of the soil, wisdom of the sky
Wisdom of the flower, wisdom of the tree
Wisdom of the hedgehog's rustling snuffling cry
Wisdom of the penguin rushing to the sea

CHORUS: Elemental knowledge - water air and sun
From this nurturing Spirit our abundance comes.

Wisdom of vibrating earth and air and fire
Wisdom of the human sounds which enrich our lives
Wisdom of the judgement to which our souls aspire
Wisdom of the angel songs that keep our hopes alive.
CHORUS

HYMN GOD AS COMPANION To any CM tune but suggested St Peter: *How sweet the name of Jesus sounds.*

1. The hand of God can gently brush
And stroke our aging skin;
So we can sense a holy joy
When heaven's veil is thin.
2. God's fingers touch us with the breeze
Caressing us with care;
It fills our bodies with God's health
And fans our rippling hair.
3. The love of God is sensuous;
We feel it with our flesh;
Through water, fire and air and earth
Our lives with Christ's enmesh.
4. So when our life is filled with stress
With loneliness or pain,
The pilgrim's way, remote, well-worn
Can fan the Spirit's flame.
5. We thank you, God, incarnate here
In things we touch and feel,
For human lives that show your power
To comfort, warm and heal.

June Boyce-Tillman at the end of the Celtic pilgrimage July 2007 –