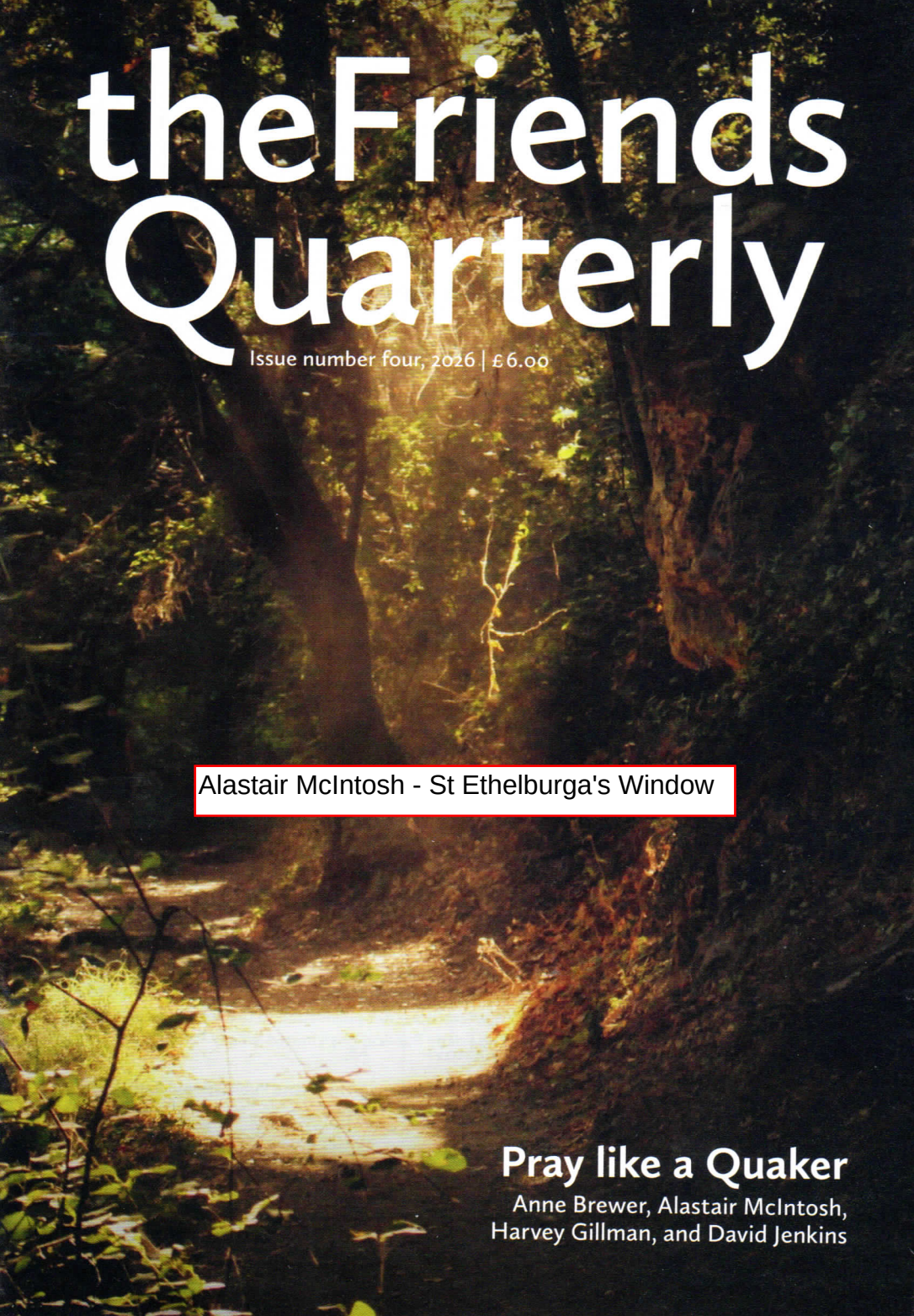
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Pray like a Quaker

Anne Brewer, Alastair McIntosh, Harvey Gillman, and David Jenkins

A Window Through the Vision of Ethelburga of Barking: Artificial intelligence, deep ecology, and the healing of the nations

Alastair McIntosh

'O Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem'

In this sharing, I want to reflect on the experience of gazing at a church stained-glass window of what mainstream Christians call a 'patron saint'. It happened when I was a speaker at an event in London in June 2025, at a conference on artificial intelligence and deep ecology. What arose, came as a surprise to the audience when I shared, but it was warmly received. It brought to light a gift in our midst in ways that even the centre's staff had not consciously seen. For *the Friends Quarterly,* I will set the experience in a context of Quaker stillness. To me, it draws out the richness that can arise from an acceptance of one's own limitations, and the Quaker principle that the 'presence' of being present can take many forms, whether in speech, silence, listening and even, physiologically not hearing.

St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace

S. Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace is a phoenix from the ruins. Previously, it was an Anglican church that was partly destroyed in 1993 by a fatal IRA bombing in London's Bishopsgate financial district.[1] The then Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, proposed a re-purposing, a new charism and calling: as the Centre's pamphlet puts it, 'a role that will turn

1 John Schofield, 'The Archaeology of Terrorism: Damage to Two Medieval Churches in the City of London in the IRA Attacks of 1992 and 1993', *The London Journal*, 45:1, 2019, pp. 86—105.

the damage caused by sectarian and communal divisions into lasting good'.[2] So it was that the church was resurrected in 2002 with a calling to weave together peace, reconciliation and ecology.

As a guest speaker at its Spiritual Ecology Festival, I found myself seated on a mid-June Saturday morning, listening to other speakers in this place that has been recognised as sacred since at least the thirteenth century. A sacred site? As TS Eliot would have it in the *Four Quartets*, that greatest of mystical poems in the English language, here was a place that might be found, perhaps: 'over a dark lake, in a desert or a city / But this is the nearest, in place and time, / Now and in England'.

Here, indeed, was a space 'hospitable to the soul', as our US Friend, Parker Palmer, puts it. A place where, as Eliot reminds us in a timbre of eternal refrain:[3]

You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
Than an order of words ... [for] the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.

As I sat there, I watched the drift of white clouds through a skylight. They were sailing through the blue between this humble little church and next door's mighty skyscraper. It was God, knock-knock-knocking on Mammon's door. Behind the speakers on the podium and filling the entire upper gable end, a huge stained-glass window showed the seventh-century Ethelburga. She had been the abbess of the Benedictine Abbey at Barking, and her spiritual illuminations, typically involving flashes of light, were documented by Bede.

This window was created as part of the 2002 reconstruction after the bomb's complete destruction of what was there before. Built into it are shards from the original, recrafted through the vision of the stained-glass artist, Helen Whittaker of Barley Studio.[4] As I gazed at Whittaker's

2 *Hope from the Ashes: Stories from the History of St Ethelburga's*, pamphlet of the Centre, undated, p19.
3 T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', *Four Quartets* (Faber: 1959).
4 Helen Whittaker, St Ethelburga – East window (3.3m x 3.3m) 2002 , Barley Studio, 2002, *https://tinyurl.com/4duzp4ma*

imaginative likeness, the saint swirled in a back-lit blaze of rippling colour as the morning sun pulsed in and out and drifted round from east to south. Some lines of an old Moody Blues lyric, 'Visions of Paradise', came running through my mind:

In the garden of her love, I'll stay awhile
To be, to be
What the seeds of her thoughts, once mean to me
Come see, come see

My hearing has always been poor, but pronouncedly so as I then approached the age of seventy. Back in the days, an LP or long-playing vinyl record seldom came with printed lyrics. I'd always misheard the penultimate line. I'd picked it up as being, 'what the seeds of her thoughts *want me to be*.'[5] Both are spiritually valid, but while one is passive the other is more in keeping with Ethelburga's forward striding in Whittaker's representation, suggestive of movement and direction.

I think of such slips, all too commonplace for me, as 'creative hearing'. Mind you, sometimes the creativity runs a bit rampant. I was once addressing a Quaker group in Exeter when an elderly gentleman got up and introduced himself as 'a bigamist'. Friends these days can be all sorts, and so I responded to his question as sensitively as I could. To this, he retorted in displeasure: 'I said, I'm a *botanist!*' In literary studies this is called *a mondegreen*. It's when you've only partly heard something so the brain creates a version to fill in the missing bits. The term comes from a 1954 essay by Sylvia Wright in *Harpers Magazine.* As a child, she'd mishear a line when her mother would read an old Scots ballad. The line goes, 'They hae slain the Earl o' Moray / And *laid him on the green*'. What she thought she'd heard, was '*Lady Mondegreen*'. It left her wondering if a mondegreen can be better than the original.[6]

So, there I was: sitting 'in the body of the kirk' in St Ethelburga's, reflecting on the qualities of its patron saint. There before me was the stained-glass Ethelburga striding down the centuries, and as I tried to interpret the artist's

5 The Moody Blues, 'Visions of Paradise', *In Search of the Lost Chord* (Deram (music): 1968). Most lyric authorities interpret it nostalgically as 'once mean', some seeing it as a lyrical softening of 'once meant'. A few individuals online go with the likely mondegreen.

6 Sylvia Wright, 'The Death of Lady Mondegreen', *Harper's Magazine*, 209:1254, 1954, pp. 48—49, *https://tinyurl.com/2wpwp5yr*

intentions, my visual mondegreens melded with the Moody Blues' aural one. I was preparing to speak later in the day and wondering what might best nourish the audience. And as I did so, I pondered on her message for all of us today: 'What the seeds of her thoughts *want me to be*'.

Deep ecology and AI

I was to be interviewed about Celtic Christian spirituality by Rebecca Brierley. She works from St Ethelburga's in community reconciliation. I was also to be on a panel hosted by the Centre's co-director, Clare Martin, on 'deep ecology'. The term derives from the Norwegian philosopher, Arne Næss. He'd been inspired both by Spinoza's thinking, and Vedic thought from ancient India. The essence of it, is that the 'small self' of our human, ego level of consciousness, rests ultimately at one with the greater 'ecological self' of all of nature. Næss was neutral on the question of God. His thought is more *pantheist* (God as nature) than *panentheist* (God in nature), but his nuances across that important distinction leave, shall we say, ample latitude for scholarly discourse.

Clare wanted to explore how contemporary concerns about AI and transhumanism might sit with a cosmology that entertains the presence of the sacred in nature. Is the brain just a biophysical computer? Or is there a 'ghost', a spirit or soul, in the machine, that renders being human something categorically different from the cyber-world? Is AI real intelligence, similar to human intelligence, with even the potential for 'consciousness'? Or are such notions muddled thinking – what philosophers call a 'category error'? That is to say, a confusion between one realm or plane of thought and another. Put another way: is 'artificial *intelligence*' a misleading philosophical mondegreen?

The question matters not just for what we might imagine machines to be capable of, but more importantly, for what we think it means to be a human being. Is the brain the *cause* of consciousness? Or is it a *consequence,* where consciousness originates in the soul, or as a wider quality of reality, and the brain tunes into it at the bio-physical level of reality? To use a metaphor: does the music come from the transistor radio, or does it come from the musician in a studio who transmits the message through the medium of the radio network, radio waves and down the aerial of a receiving device?

Not all the speakers were as easy for me to make out as others. At times, therefore, I found myself drifting into a Quaker-like stillness. In so doing, I'll often settle into that line from the Psalms: 'Be still, and know that I am God'.[7] I find that you can play with it in so many ways; play, in the Vedic sense of *lila* or cosmic play. The obvious reading is God speaking to us. But if you play around with that 'I am', if you listen as a mystic might, it can become an invitation to 'participate' or 'partake in the divine nature'.[8] As the Vedic texts of Hindu faiths have it, *Tat tvam asi,* 'Thou art that'. Here the *Atman,* or individual soul, rests into *Brahman* the universal soul.

Moreover, there's just so many different Bible translation variants of 'Be still' (KJV). 'Be empty' (CBTV); 'return' (PHBT); 'desist' (LSV); 'repent' (LB); 'be in awe' (ISV); 'stop striving' (NASB); 'stop fighting' (CSB); 'calm down' (CEV); 'let be' (JPST), and 'let go of your concerns!' (GWT).[9] As a Quaker, I notice that the Psalm would convey a very different energy were it rendered, 'Be *silent*...'! Depending on the context, *silence* can suggest a bleak and even a controlling emptiness. I therefore often choose to speak of Quaker stillness rather than silence, though both have their places. The French Friend Pierre Lacout's beautiful little book, *God is Silence* (previously published by Friends House, but now out of print) is a case where 'silence' perhaps suggests a more personal presence of being.[10]

Often in spiritual life, the more the outer volume turns down, the more the inner volume turns up. As another line from the said Moody Blues album has it: 'far away the distant sound / is with us every day'.

Ghost in the machine

As the conference moved from speaker to speaker, there was Ethelburga, our presiding spiritual host. Her left hand holds a shepherd's crook, a staff, crosier or *cromak*, symbolic of spiritual leadership. It rests firmly on the ground, presence in the here and now. One can only imagine the daily practicalities of what it might have taken to run her monastery. Remarkably, it held both nuns and monks. Even today, when I visit religious establishments, I'll often remind those who carry the most responsibility of

7 Psalms 46:10, KJV
8 2 Peter 1:4, NIV
9 Psalms 46:10, variations & abbreviations at: *https://biblehub.com/kjv/psalms/46-10.htm*
10 Pierre Lacout, *God is Silence*, (Quaker Home Service, reprinted 2005 by Quaker Books)

what Adomnán of Iona said in the late seventh century, as he struggled to make time for literary work. 'I have written down these things about the Holy Places in what I admit is a poor style, but I have done so in the face of daily labour coming at me from all sides; the sheer volume of ecclesiastical concerns seems overwhelming.'[11]

With Ethelburga's left hand earthed, both her right hand and her gaze reach outwards and upwards, as if she's drawing on something invisible, 'on earth ... as is in heaven'. I thought, how prescient it seemed to the weekend's theme. AI, robotics, secular politics and even some of our activism for a better world might be firmly rooted in material reality on the one hand, but what will it profit us if it lacks what's being drawn on by the right hand: the Holy Spirit, the Dharma, the 'Buddha nature', the Tao, Ruach, or 'the way, the truth and the life' of John's gospel?[12] Moses wished that all God's people would be prophets, but he bolsters his prayer with the proviso, '*and* that the Lord would put his spirit on them.'[13] Therein lies the difference between the false prophet with secular charisma, where it comes from and collapses back into ego, and the real prophet who bears a *charism* or spiritual gift where it comes from soul sustained by God. As an old Quaker woman once advised me, 'It is perilous to neglect your spiritual life.'[14]

The question around AI and all technologies, is *What is their God? What do they serve? To what are they 'obedient'?* And I use that word with a double edge, raising on the one hand the question of control, and on the other, a deeper and older sense that Shakespeare captured where he wrote of, 'Floating ... obedient to the streame'.[15] As we might see it, this suggests going with the 'carrying stream' of God's flow, with the Dharma in its dynamic sense of reality emerging through time, or as Quakers sometimes put it, the opening of the Way.

A materialistic worldview lacks the animating essence that offers life as love made manifest. That is why AI can give no promised 'life abundantly'[16] if it is set up as an idol, as if it can potentially be bestowed of consciousness,

11 Adomnán, De Locis Sanctis.
12 John 14:6.
13 Numbers 11:29.
14 Mary Roslin, late of Glasgow Meeting.
15 Shakespeare, The Comedy of Errors, Act 1, Scene 1, 1594.
16 John 10:10

and even of soul with quasi 'human rights'. AI can be a good tool - most of us now are wittingly or unwittingly using its 'large language models' as a tool – but a hollow master. Deep ecology can deepen into God, not least as ecotheology points to in the biblical Book of Job or the Psalms.[17] AI, however, is but a simulacrum of intelligence. It should not be confused with what it emulates. The sign is not to be confused with what it symbolises; the map is not the territory.

To make that confusion of categories and afford AI ontological status is perfectly logical if we believe that consciousness itself is merely a product of the brain. As the intelligence psychologist once told me fifty years ago, 'I believe that consciousness is an epiphenomenon of brain activity'. Then, all that science has to do to make AI consciousness a reality is to emulate the brain's complexity as a biophysical machine. But if we are correct in diagnosing the misplaced concreteness of a category error, down that path lies nihilism, and nihilism not towards the machine that has no soul (for Claude doesn't really care about you), but of our own worldview. We might note that, as Dostoevsky was at pains to point out, a society based on nihilism is a vacuous society. It can wreck the world, but without God's spirit guiding and sustaining it, it lacks the wellsprings of redemption.

One of the other speakers at the conference underscored the importance of this grounding in what most makes us human. After describing her family's flight from Pol Pot's genocidal Khmer Rouge, Kalyanee Mam said that once the killing times are over, families have to sit down with other families and get on again with life. Another speaker, Sicelo Mbatha, spoke about the spirit of Ubuntu: that 'I am because you are'. He reminded me of African healers who say their task is 'calling back the soul'.So too, perhaps, our task in 'gathered' Quaker calling.

And so, back to our patron saint. To call back the soul, to ground our psyches in a deep ecology, Ethelburga's staff is planted with her left hand. But this is more than just a *pantheism,* where God is conflated with nature. This is an infinitely deeper *panentheism*, where God is immanent in nature, but God is also transcendent, sustaining the whole material shebang from a place outside of space and time. And as Job so clearly saw, although 'the

17 Job chapters 12 and 35—38; Psalms 104

tabernacles of robbers prosper, and they that provoke God are secure,' this deeper nature knows the greater truth: 'Who knowest not in all of these that the hand of the Lord hath wrought this. '[18]

The reader might wonder why I've used the King James Version of 1611, also called the Authorised Version? I often go to it for the poetry more than translational accuracy or clarity. But just in case anybody's left scratching their head, I pasted that verse into AI and requested a contemporary rendition. I used Elon Musk's *Grok*, just for the mischievous hell of it! It gave a rather splendid exegesis, and suggested: 'Everyone knows — who doesn't? — that it is God who made and governs all these things. '

My Light comes from God

There was more to Ethelburga's gift that weekend. Bede tells us that she 'was tireless in caring for the spiritual and material needs of the monks and nuns in her charge'. When a plague 'swept through the land of the East Saxons', it was the monks who died first. Ethelburga knew that the sisters would be next, so she asked them where they would like to be buried. One morning, as they prayed for the souls of their deceased brothers, 'the sun began to rise on the eastern horizon.' Such was the clarity of the air that it 'shone even more brightly than it does at noon; its rays bathed the south side of the chapel in a warm orange light [and] the nuns knew at once that this is where they should be buried.'[19]

As they too succumbed to the affliction – a 'holy dying' to use a term from seventeenth-century English spirituality – one of the sisters asked the others to extinguish a light beside her bed. Bede says they ignored her request, to which she retorted: 'You may think that my mind is wandering. But I can see such brightness in the room that the lamp appears to me as darkness. Let the lamp burn as long as you wish. I assure you that it gives me no light. My light comes from God; and it will reach its fullness when the light of dawn comes.'

So, there we have it! Straight from a seventh-century authority! AI is but a small lamp in the room. Our calling is towards a greater light.

18 Job 12:6, 9, KJV.

19 Robert van de Weyer (ed.), *Bede: Celtic and Roman Christianity in Britain*, Arthur James Ltd., 6:4—7, pp. 51—54

Healing of the nations

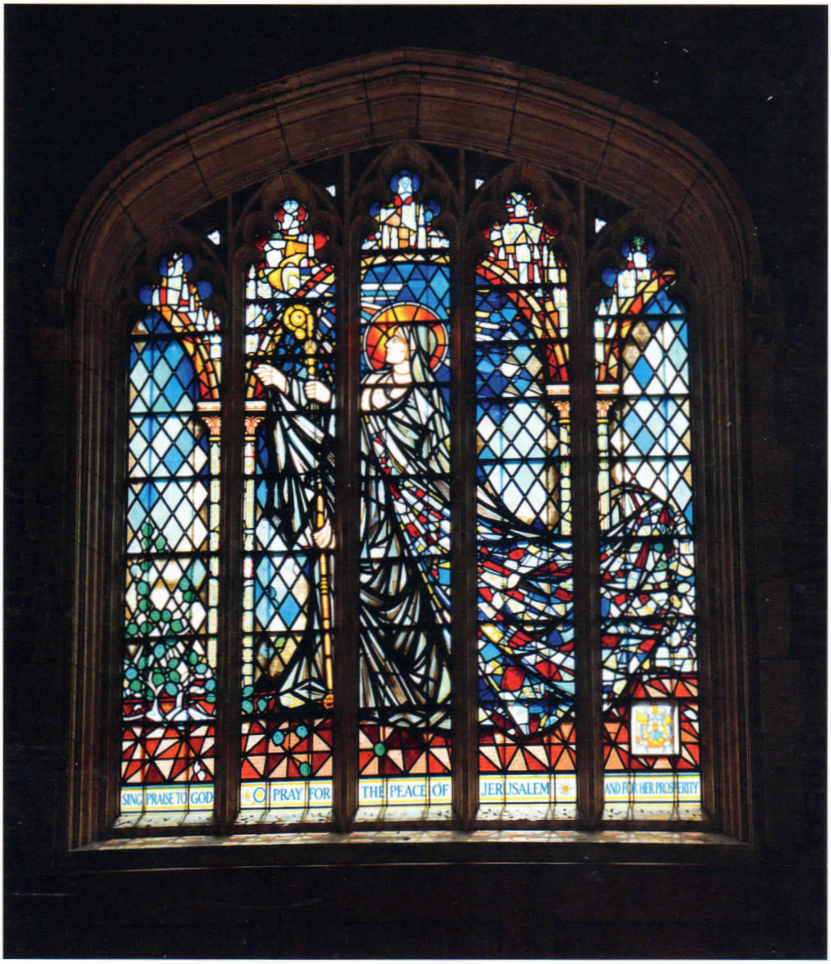
To my eye, then, Helen Whittaker's window leads us through into that greater light. As I watched the sun dancing through the saint's cloak, so many colours, I began to see a greater movement in the artwork... It's as if her cloak is made of something that she's drawing down, an offshoot of a stream that's coming from the top of the second panel, 'streams of living water', and to mix the metaphor as scripture itself invites, flamed with 'tongues of fire'.[20] It's gushing from a culvert at the base of a towering temple-like structure.

Along the top of all five panels, there's imagery that looks like pinewood forests. Along the bottom, they are deciduous, with leaves scattered on the ground. Whittaker's description on the Barley Studios web page confirms the impression. The saint's 'upward gaze [is] held by the radiant vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem,' and 'from a crack in the tiled floor of the first light grows a Hazel bush (Corylus avellana) shedding leaves and fruit – a symbol of Peace and Reconciliation.'

It calls to mind the vision of Ezekiel, where a steam breaks forth from underneath the threshold of the temple.[21] It flows across the long-parched land, and as it goes it waters trees on *both* sides of its banks. Both sides! Coniferous and deciduous! The water that gives life is non-partisan, it's not just on our own side. Ezekiel tells us that the leaves of the trees are for healing. In the same chapter, he goes on to talk about the righteous division of the land: that both the children of the alien (or foreigners) and the native people are to be allotted *equal* shares of land, and that the second generation of the alien is to be brought into the fulness of the community 'as native-born Israelites'.[22] Here we see an ethos of coming to belong that is not 'send them home', but rather, 'make them at home'.

Cut to the very end of the Christian Bible, to the last chapter of the Book of Revelation, and there Ezekiel's vision resurges as the fulfilment of the eschaton, the completeness of end times.[23] As the late Scottish Quaker Christine Davis once told me, 'We have a realised eschatology.' The end of

20 John 7:38; Acts 2:3
21 Ezekiel 47:1-12
22 Ezekiel 47:21-23, NIV
23 Revelation 22:1-5



all things is enfolded in the human-divine heart, in the sacrament of the present moment.[24] Ezekiel's stream is nothing other than 'the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal' that flows from underneath the throne of God. In such a vision, Eden is restored, the trees on either side as branches of the 'the Tree of Life', and their leaves, 'for the healing of the nations'.[25]

24 Luke 17:21; (SOTPM - Jean-Pierre de Caussade)
25 Revelation 22:1,2

Prayer for Jerusalem

To underline her brilliant artistic theology, right along the bottom of the five panels Whittaker inscribed a line from the Psalms: 'O PRAY FOR THE PEACE OF JERUSALEM'.[26]

My friend the late Walter Wink, who wrote a trilogy on 'the powers' and social justice, once told me that he'd visited Jerusalem but couldn't sleep all night for three nights running.

'Why so?' I asked, naively.

'Because I was wrestling with the Angel of Jerusalem,' he blurted out, as if it should have been obvious.

Jerusalem, standing as the confluence of all three Abrahamic faiths, has been one of the most violent cities of all time. Nonetheless, and perhaps because of this, its God-given higher calling is to be 'a light unto the nations'.[27] As I looked at the news at the end of that weekend at the St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, I saw that on top of what was being done to Gaza, Israel and Iran were tearing pieces out of one another with missile attacks.

'O PRAY FOR THE PEACE OF JERUSALEM'.

Ethelburga died 'way back in 675. But Helen Whittaker has sustained her prayer in visual art.[28] It is a work of devotional genius. For as RS Thomas put it:[29]

The parish
has a saint's name time cannot
unfrock...
You must remain
Kneeling.

26 Psalms 122:6

27 Isaiah 49:6. See my essay on this, 'To restore a light unto the nations: Israel, Palestine, Scotland and the charter of the land', *Theology in Scotland*, 32.1, 2025, pp. 5–24. Open access: *https://tinyurl.com/37xc6d6r*

28 I sent Helen Whittaker a draft of this article. I was relieved and thankful for her approval

29 Anthony Thwaite (ed.), *R.S. Thomas* (anthology), (Everyman: 1996), p82

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