

The Church and the Johannesburg Summit

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As we approach, and prepare for, the Johannesburg Summit—Rio plus 10—we need all the wisdom we can muster if the human family is to move, beyond the faltering steps of Rio '92, into genuine sustainable living on the earth. Anything less than *genuine* sustainability, considering our present population, consumption, and technology, will spell catastrophes within this century. The Earth Charter, an interfaith declaration of principles, says 'Every individual, family, organisation, and community has a vital role to play. The arts, sciences, religions, educational institutions, media, businesses, non-governmental organisations, and governments are all called to offer creative leadership.'¹ The Earth Charter identifies no one religion, nor religion itself, as the global 'mother church', or pre-eminent pillar of earth ethics. Significantly, however, several important contributors to the Charter are Christian. One, Steven Rockefeller, observes, 'Many of the critical concerns and spiritual ideals affirmed in the document resonate with values that have traditionally been important to Christians.'² The Christian religion has a cosmic dimension, for in Jesus incarnate, God unites himself with all humanity, and therefore with the whole earth community. Rockefeller argues that social ethics extends to the whole earth community. More strikingly still, an American astronaut, and Christian, James Irwin, says, 'It is more important that Christ walked upon the earth, than that man walked upon the moon.'

Jesus Walks the Earth

But what do we know about Jesus walking the earth that can inspire us, as Christians, to sustainable living, Earth Charter values, and support of the Johannesburg summit? Neither Josephus, Suetonius, nor Tacitus, nor other early non-Christian historians, inform us about Jesus and ecology, although the church historian Eusebius relates that two nephews were countrymen, working what we would call a small holding (H.E. 3.19,20). Most of what we know about Jesus' life on earth we discover in the New Testament, especially in our four brief, canonical gospels. The gospels, written within the first century, largely Jewish context, are already interpretations of the significance of Jesus in the dazzling light of the resurrection.

John's gospel, redacted near the end of the first century, proclaims that God's Word was with God in the beginning; and that in Jesus, that Word, through whom God created all things, became flesh and lived here on earth. In John, as in the earlier synoptics, we notice that Jesus befriended, and helped, some articulate women. One of them, Martha of Bethany, professed in her own words, the key point of John's eloquent prologue: 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world' (John 1.1–3, 14; 11.27). When we venerate the cross, and when we make the sign of the cross, we profess that, in Jesus, pre-existent and incarnate, there dwells Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God and Saviour, one Creator and Lord. Patrick Kavanagh speaks for Christian people who, with special appreciation of every tree, express their faith in the Trinity, Incarnation, and Salvation.

Sometimes when the sun comes through a gap,
These men see God the Father in a tree;
The Holy Spirit is the rising sap,
And Christ will be the green leaves that will come
At Easter from the sealed and guarded tomb.

When we plant trees, therefore, and restore forests and hedges, we enable what Pope John Paul II described, in a letter to artists, as 'new epiphanies of beauty'.

There are many signs and hints of earth inclusiveness in the gospel portraits of Jesus. Especially since the imaginative evangelization of Francis of Assisi, in the creche at Greccio, people associate the birth of Jesus, and the Lucan manger (*phatne*), with the familiar domestic animals described by Isaiah, 'The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib' (Is. 1.3). Jesus illustrated his own teaching with the same inclusiveness of these animals. 'Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it?' (Lk. 13.15). In Christian literature and art, of East and West, Jesus is associated with these domestic animals, and with sheep and straw, with shepherds, a star, magi and date palms and water. The animals and plants have their rightful places at the birth of the Messiah, in early Christian art and poetry, in high gothic, in baroque, and in modern art and literature. As Chesterton saw, all the flowers looked up at Him, and all the stars looked down. When we facilitate humane conditions for animals, anywhere on earth, we are consistent with the high view of animals at Jesus' birth. We can contribute, at least individually, to the Earth Summit's attempts to reverse climate change, water shortages, deforestation, and subsequent suffering of animals, by supporting the Catholic Study Circle for the Welfare of Animals, The Anglican Society for the Welfare of Animals, Compassion in World Farming, and other worthy animal charities.

Jesus matured at Nazareth of Galilee. 'Nazarean', 'Nazarine', or 'of Nazareth' became almost his surname. The village nestled on a sunny hill overlooking the fertile plain of Esdraelon, the imagined green fields of Shakespeare, where walked those blessed feet, which to our advantage, were nailed to the bitter cross. The winter rains can pound the chalky hills, while summers are parched. Jesus knew dry husbandry, unlike the fields of Mesopotamia (where aquifers are in the very name!). At Nazareth precious rain was 'harvested' and stored in cisterns. Careful irrigation, including manual watering, were necessary for plant, animal, and human life. There was, and is, very little 'virtual water' in the Nazareth biosystem, that is, water which, as in northwest Europe, permeates the soil. Whoever eats fruit and vegetable consumes water. To export food is to export water. Not surprisingly, then, Jesus shows awareness of the importance of moisture for seed germination, and the value of moisture retentive compost and manure. Jesus lived and grew food in a dry climate, where water was rare and precious most of the year. With climate change, and human population growth, many parts of the world already are short of water. When we reverence and preserve water, we do what Jesus did in dry Nazareth.

Galilee villagers would have understood the worried Egyptians' plea to Joseph, 'give us seed that we may live and not die, and that the land be not desolate' (Gn. 47.19). Jesus learned local seed lore, and may have helped his family to save their heirloom seeds. His parables show profound understanding of the symbiosis of soil fertility, friability, and local seeds. He knew, as do modern growers, the difficulties with sowing into weedy, compacted, or stony soil. There is love in letting one's own seeds fall carefully from fingers into well prepared soil.

How love burns through the putting in the seed
On through the watching for that early birth
When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,
The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
Shouldering its ways and shedding the earth crumbs.

Robert Frost, '*Putting in the Seed*'.

Seed diversity is threatened today, as corporations privatise, modify, and eliminate seed varieties. As Christians we are people of seeds, and should assist those, such as HDRA, the National Organic Gardening Organisation and the Seed Bank at Wakefield Place, to preserve our seed genetic heritage.³

Luke says that Jesus was 'subject' to his parents at Nazareth, just as demons were later, albeit involuntarily, 'subjected' to him (Lk. 2.51; 10.17, 20). Jesus was sustained, or 'brought up', at Nazareth (Lk. 4.16) This sustenance included education about the natural world. There

remain, in densely populated Palestine and Israel, floral remnants about which he learned, common plants such as bramble, mallow, nettle, and lupin, and varieties less familiar in northern bioregions, such as wild iris and cyclamen, sea squid, coral peony, and pheasant's eye. He observed wild animals, such as birds and fox and vipers, which penetrated human settlements, and wilder creatures such as wolves. Jesus' familiarity with Galilee biodiversity should make us appreciate our own region's, and the planet's, biodiversity which the Earth Summit hopes to preserve. We can strengthen conservationists by supporting our own county wildlife trusts.

The Wilderness Years

After leaving his paternal home at Nazareth, Jesus spent some time in the Judean wilderness with John the Baptist and his community. The wilderness period, perhaps with John as mentor, is significant for Jesus' sensitivity to wild nature, especially in the thinly populated Judean wilderness where Jesus may have remained for some months among John's community, living an alternative, partly self-sufficient lifestyle. Self sufficiency, living at least partly off the land, is implied in traditions about John, garbed like Elijah, the wilderness prophet, in a rough garment and girdle, eating locusts and wild honey. How long Jesus remained in John's community, and precisely when he left the Baptist, is unknown. But for the rest of his post-Nazareth life Jesus lived a lifestyle alternative to the Jewish and Roman establishments, for whom money and possessions were very important. He did not end up crucified for conforming to the received wisdoms of his time! Jesus may have intended some of his disciples to live in alternative communities, comparable to the urban Essenes, some of the pharisees, and indeed the first Jerusalem church as Luke famously describes it (Acts 4.32–35). Small, alternative groups, or local churches, will become increasingly relevant, if Christian numbers, and ordained ministers, continue to decline.

Jesus' own baptism by John, 'sanctifying the Jordan' says Gregory Nazianzus (Orat. 3.9.16), may be considered 'the institution' of our own. The Baptism, as early Christian art shows, is a Trinitarian, and an ecological, epiphany. Early Christian theological art, when still reticent about images of God, portrayed a naked, frontal Jesus, with only rays, or a rainbow, above. Eventually a dove hovers, representing the Holy Spirit, a hand appears from a cloud, representing the Father while 'the unoffending feet' of Jesus, God's Word, often stand upon the vanquished water monster (Gn. 3.15; Is. 27.1). Jesus' baptism, in its sanctification of the world's waters, symbolises a new creation: 'The Spirit who hovered over the waters at the first creation, descended on Christ as a prelude to the new creation' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1224).

The Public Ministry

After departing from John's wilderness community Jesus remained in the wilderness 'with the wild animals', says Mark (1.13). Jesus' presence with the wild animals of the wilderness recalls Isaian pictures of the awaited peaceable kingdom (Is. 11.1–9; 65.25). Returning to Galilee and Judea, Jesus gathered followers, preaching the nearness of God's kingdom, which, far from being for people, or souls, alone, includes the whole earth community. Claus Westerman notes that 'Israel's relationship with God corresponds to the behaviour of the creatures. God created them all, the migratory birds, the mountains and his people Israel'.⁴ Jesus illustrated his preaching of God's kingdom with metaphors and pictures of the natural world, with which he lived so intimately, at Nazareth, in the wilderness, and throughout his public ministry. A beautiful collection of Jesus' naturalistic teaching is in the fourth chapter of St Mark and in Matthew 13, sometimes called 'the green chapters'. Here we behold a biodiverse world of seeds germinating, or failing, of olives, mustard bushes, golden harvests, wilderness, and the sea. The Marcan (and, probably, pre-Markan) series, ends in the dramatic storm at sea, wherein Jesus calmly reverses Jonah's debacle. Jonah dozed, and calmed the storm only by being thrown overboard. Jesus quieted the storm majestically, in a theophany (Jon. 1.15; Mk. 4.39).

Evangelization, including Jesus' own preaching of the kingdom, both includes, and transcends, words. 'Preach always. Sometimes use words', is a venerable dictum. Similarly, a Jesuit spiritual director used to tell struggling scholastics, 'What you are shouting so loudly, I cannot hear what you say.' Jesus' festive meals were enacted parables that used, and went beyond, words, evoking the earth inclusiveness of the kingdom already begun in the parables, and in the meals themselves. E.P. Sanders observes that 'several parables tell us that the kingdom is like a banquet to which many are called. And, most tellingly, before his death Jesus looked forward to drinking the fruit of the vine in the kingdom of God'.⁵ Shared meals, with locally grown food and drink, are an inclusive way for us, Jesus' followers, to preach, and enact, God's kingdom.⁶ The 'feeding of the multitude' is a shared meal, with Jesus, his immediate disciples, and other invited guests or listeners, at or near the lake. If the memorable meal took place near Capernaum, fish and salted fish, as well as bread, would have been readily available. John Meier suggests, 'The miracle story of the feeding of the multitude may be based on a symbolic meal that the historical Jesus celebrated with a large crowd by the Sea of Galilee, a meal that perhaps was interpreted as miraculous only later on by the early church'.⁷

A substantial core of Jesus' recorded acts of healing narrate real

events in the public life of Jesus. 'He was a human being so close to his God that God's own creative power flowed out from him in healing waves,' writes Donald Senior. 'He was a man so charged with God's compassion and love that any cry of pain or confusion drew from him an instant response of healing and restoration'.⁸ Jesus' mighty works symbolize the beginning of God's kingdom in Jesus' person and works. Most of his mighty works, including the exorcisms, involved healing. 'The exorcisms', says Senior, are 'acts of healing whereby Jesus liberates the victim from an evil spirit'.⁹ Whenever genuine healing occurs, human relationships with the whole earth community are improved, for no person could be healed integrally if she or he is earth illiterate or abusive. When Jesus cited his healing miracles, in reply to a query from the Baptist, the Isaian text to which he refers is preceded by the flowering of nature, 'Waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water' (Is. 35.6–7). When Jesus returned to Nazareth he read in the synagogue, as was his custom. Luke says he read texts related to Jubilee, when the whole soil community enjoys release and rest (Lk. 4.16–21; Is. 61.1–2; 58.6). The recovering blind man of Bethsaida compares the people he dimly sees to trees walking (Mk. 8.24). Children return to parents, a brother and mother to their families. The lame and paralysed walk, a crippled woman stands upright. In the lovely story of the Syro-Phoenecian woman, the dogs beneath the table have their place. An exorcised Mary Magdalene, following Jesus loyally, watches in the garden where he was killed, and, discovering Jesus risen, becomes *apostola apostolorum*.

Nowhere in the gospels is Jesus unkind to people, or to animals. At Galilee, where he permits expelled demons to inhabit some swine, it is the demons, not he, who drive the hapless animals into the sea. Orthodox liturgies commemorate the wilted fig tree, a story unique in the gospels. The liturgies recall the story of Joseph rebuffing the promiscuous Egyptian woman, 'Fearing a similar sentence to that of the fruitless fig tree, brethren, let us bring forth fruits worthy of repentance.' At Jerusalem, Jesus may have expressed regret, as we sometimes do, that the relatively rare early summer figs, were not quite in season, perhaps quoting Micah 7.1, 'My soul desires the first ripe fig', and possibly expressing apocalyptic hope for abundant fruit in the final days. The actual cursing and withering of the tree seems to be early Christian embellishment, neatly symbolizing Jesus' importance in the fall of the temple (Mk. 11.12–14; Mt. 21.18–19).¹⁰ The healing stories, of which the Gerasene exorcism is a well attested example, symbolize God's inclusive kingdom, which includes heaven and earth. N.T. Wright argues,

The point of the present kingdom is that it is the first-fruits of the future kingdom; and the future kingdom involves the abolition, not of space, time, or the cosmos itself, but rather of that which threatens space, time, and creation, namely, sin and death. The vision of 1 Corinthians 15 thus coheres neatly with that of Romans 8.18–27, and, for that matter, Revelation 21. The creation itself will experience its exodus, its return from exile, consequent upon the resurrection of the messiah and his people."

Cosmic Cross, Cosmic Circle

The last supper in Jerusalem, included the central creatures of the Palestine soil, grain and grapes, herbs and a lamb. Gardens too were included in the passion, at Gethsemane, and at Jesus' death and burial (Jn. 18.1, 19.41). At Jesus' death there were, says Matthew, apocalyptic upheavals, culminating in the faith of the centurion (Mt. 27.51–54). Henceforth the whole cosmos is the Holy Land. Jesus is the presence of God, the renewed temple. The Sabbath becomes a time to celebrate and continue the arrival of God's kingdom in Jesus. Julian of Norwich, contemplating the passion and death, felt that all creation failed when Jesus failed. 'The firmament and the earth failed in their natural functions because of sorrow at Christ's death, for it is their natural characteristic to recognize him as their Lord, in whom all their powers exist.' The cross, far from being confined to Golgotha, is the cosmic cross, extending from the earth to the heavens, and through its arms, which held Christ's arms, to the ends of the earth. St John associates Jesus, the new Adam, with Mary, the new Eve and mother of all the living (Jn. 19.26). St Paul also describes Jesus as the New Adam restoring all creation, having become 'a life-giving spirit' (1 Cor. 15.25, 45). Jesus' 'descent' symbolizes the completeness of his death, 'as dead as we will ever be' (W.H. Auden), wherein he reconciles even death. Jesus, in Christian writing and art, is pictured as active even in Hades (1 Pt. 3.18–20). His descent, resurrection, and ascent complete the cosmic circle. Henceforth Jesus fills the whole universe. 'He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things' (Eph. 4.10)

Conclusion

Christians have a distinctive contribution to offer as we approach the Johannesburg Summit. We are the people of the cosmic cross and the cosmic circle. We share creation, and redemption in Christ, with the whole of space and time. Jesus, through whom the earth is created, contains, in his humanity, the whole earth community, as do we. Jesus was, and is, the earth responding totally to God. A theologian gardener

Vigen Guroian writes, 'At the end of the gardening season, when the leaves of the sugar maple turn canary yellow and flutter in flocks onto the browning earth, Christians remember the Cross. In November, as Advent draws near, look up!—hundreds of wooden crosses reach to the horizon and the birds find rest in them.'¹² What happened to Jesus in his history, his passion, death, and triumph, will happen to the whole cosmos, including each and every human person. When we take 'a long, loving look at the real', the whole Christian reality, with Jesus at the centre, we discover that the cross filled earth of which we are a part, and for which we are responsible, shares our redemption. We who are subordinate sovereigns, under God, in our created earth community, are the earth community longing for God. James Irwin, the eighth man to tread the moon, is as right as the planets he pondered: It is more important that Christ walked upon the earth, than that man walked upon the moon. In Jesus God walked, and redeemed, our earth. The reality of his incarnation should put his followers in the vanguard of the forthcoming Earth Summit at Johannesburg.

- 1 *The Earth Charter: Values and Principles for a Sustainable Future*, International Earth Charter Committee. Copies of the Earth Charter in leaflet form are available from Earth Charter International Secretariat, c/o Earth Council, PO Box 319–6100 San Jose, Costa Rica.
- 2 Steven Rockefeller, 'Christian Faith and Earth Charter Values', *Dialog*, Summer 2001, p. 132.
- 3 Patrick Mulvany, 'Saving the Genes in Our Beans', *The Organic Way*, Issue 165, Autumn. 2001, pp. 28–29.
- 4 Claus Westermann, *The Parables of Jesus in the Light of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1990), p. 60.
- 5 E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London, SCM, 1985), p. 208.
- 6 On the imperative of local food, cf. Richard Frazer, 'Give us back our food', *The Tablet*, 25 August, 2001, p. 198; Helena Norberg Hodge, *From the Ground Up: Rethinking Industrial Agriculture* (London, Zed Books, 2001), esp. pp. 39–44.
- 7 John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. II (New York, Doubleday, 1994), p. 968.
- 8 Donald Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait* (New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1992), p. 116.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- 10 For detailed analysis—and bibliography—of the Gerasene and fig tree stories, see John Meier, *Ibid.*, pp. 651–653; 666–667; 884–896; 977–982.
- 11 N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London, SPCK, 1996), p. 218.
- 12 Vigen Guroian, *Inheriting Paradise. Meditations on Gardening* (London, SPCK, 2001), p. 74.