

## THE TEMENOS ACADEMY

### SACRED NATURE

Making connections between Heaven and Earth

// anecdote re WDPS

I am honoured to be the Academy's Guest Lecturer this evening and I begin by saluting the Temenos Academy for its advocacy of the sacredness of nature; for its convictions about the spiritual dimension to life which correspond with my own view that humanity is still driven by its moral and spiritual instincts.

// anecdote re Flight

It was the former Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks who took my thinking about the sacredness of the Earth in a new direction. Just after the turn of the Millennium I took Sabbatical leave from my post as Bishop of Liverpool, returned to my Theological College in Oxford and studied the relationship between theology and ecology.

// anecdote re Blackwells and 'Soil and Soul'

I sought also to understand the different perspectives of other faiths. I enlisted on a course in Islamic Theology and asked to interview a number of faith leaders including Lord Sacks who was the Chief Rabbi at the time.

The subject of my study had been prompted by my engagement with hundreds of young people in and around Liverpool. In the Millennium year I visited 16 secondary schools to hear the dreads and dreams of as many 16 to 18 year olds as possible and to share with them why I thought the teachings of Jesus Christ were still relevant 2000 years on. I explored with them the spiritual and moral instincts evident in human behaviour.

I asked them on a scale of 0 to 10 how worried were they about the future of the Earth. I asked them to raise a hand if they had placed themselves between 5 and 10. In each school 100% of hands went up.

I then asked to what extent should we do something about it bearing in mind that 'should' was a moral word and we might explore where that sense of morality came from. I asked them to place themselves between 0 and 10. In every school 98% placed themselves between 5 and 10. 20 years before Greta Thunberg here were some 4000 young people expressing a moral imperative, in effect, to respect the sacredness of nature. It presented me with a challenge to re-think my own attitude to and ethics about the Earth and Nature. Hence the Sabbatical.

There were three highlights to my conversation with Lord Sacks. Firstly, when I asked him about the Jewish ethic of caring for the Earth I suggested that it began with the opening chapters of Genesis and the giving of dominion over creation to humankind. "Oh! That's a very Christian way of interpreting the Bible!" he gently chided me. "No", he said firmly, "the Jewish ethic begins in Deuteronomy (20; 19,20) where God's people are ordered never ever to destroy in the Land of Promise a fruit-bearing tree." Long before we understood the science of the changing climate and the role of trees within our ecosystem there in Scripture in the Torah is the wisdom to protect the Earth's forests.

The second high-light was the Chief Rabbi asking me if I knew what the three most extraordinary words of Jesus were. I had to confess that the question stumped me. Here was a rabbi asking a bishop a question about Christology which he couldn't answer! "Well", said the rabbi, "The three words are 'But I say'." Apparently there is no example in rabbinic literature of a rabbi saying with reference to Scripture and the traditions 'But I say'. This insight points up the radical character of Jesus' teaching.

And that brings me to the third and most significant highlight of our conversation which changed the direction of my sabbatical study and profoundly affected my understanding of the relationship between Christian theology and ecology and lays the foundation of this timid essay on the sacred nature of creation.

“May his memory be for a blessing.”

When I told him that I was seeking to study Jesus’ teaching about and relationship with the Earth Lord Sacks posed another pertinent question (and I paraphrase): “You do realise, don’t you, that the only title that Jesus ever takes to himself is ‘Son of Man’? and you know that in Hebrew and Aramaic those words mean ‘Child of the One hewn from the Earth’?” So here I was studying the relationship between Jesus and the Earth and here’s a rabbi telling me 2000 years later that this rabbi 2000 years ago saw himself not just as a child of Heaven but a a child of the Earth!

It was a Damascus Road encounter! On my return from the Chief Rabbi’s home in London to Oxford I began searching the Scriptures with a deeper hunger and devouring those verses in the Gospels when Jesus called himself the ‘Son of Man’/‘child of the earth’ and in the same breath talked about the earth.

There are at least six separate verses in the Gospels when Jesus speaks of himself as Child of the Earth and in the same breath refers to the earth. Forgive me if this is an ignorant or perhaps an arrogant claim but in 2000 years of Christian theology no scholar has ever made a study of this unique collection of sayings. Furthermore, there are shelves of tomes about the meaning of ‘the Son of Man’ of which I have read only the standard texts but to my limited knowledge few pay attention to its etymological derivation, instead concentrating on the important context of the books of Ezekiel and Daniel.

There is no doubt that cultural context influences hermeneutics so, for example, times of conflict will encourage believers to study the Bible in order to support or deny theories of a just war. Now in this generation with growing awareness of the anthropogenic causes of environmental disaster people of faith are at last beginning to search their sacred texts to unearth their own responsibility for the future well being of the earth in which human destiny is inextricably bound.

At last, people of faith are discovering that we are a part of the natural world and not apart from it.

Published over 60 years ago in 1962 Rachel Carson's book 'Silent Spring' charted the harmful effects of pesticides on the environment. An environmentalist she criticised the chemical industry and policy officials. She also had in her sights religion and Christianity in particular for encouraging the exploitation of the Earth through its misinterpretation and misapplication of the word 'dominion' in Genesis.

"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Genesis 1;28).

Her criticism stung many but not all in the Church. It's been pointed out that the context of this imperative is the description of humans being made in the image of God, both male and female. Thus the dominion is not one of a rapist but of one who cares for creation in the same manner as its Creator. Furthermore, in the following chapter when humankind is told to 'till and to keep the Garden of Eden' the words in Hebrew suggest a stronger meaning of 'to serve and preserve'.

Of course, there are some who accuse us of simply jumping on the green waggon in order to become more relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

But in my case, having been so accused, it was the challenge of thousands of young people in my pastoral care and the biblical insights of the Chief Rabbi that drove me back to the Gospels to read them again – admittedly with green-tinted spectacles – and to see not only if I had missed something but also if there was something specifically in Jesus' own words that spoke into our new awareness of the sacredness of the earth.

Much if not most Christian commentary about caring for Creation draws on Genesis, the Psalms and the Epistles (e.g. Genesis 1&2; Psalm 104: Colossians 1). There is relatively little reference to the Gospels. The emphasis on the Old Testament is good because it extends the common ground and embraces both Jews and Muslims. However, when Lord Sacks opened my eyes to Jesus' connection with the Earth I found that hitherto familiar passages offered unfamiliar insights.

One of the most famous sayings of Jesus is the Lord's Prayer.

// Anecdote re LP 56 words, 10 Commandments over 300, EC Reg on Caramel 26,911! Truth economical with words.

As I re-read the text of the Gospels, hand in hand with the Greek text, and with a fresh understanding of Jesus as the Child of the Earth as well as the Child of Heaven I began to see deeper meanings. The next time you hear the Lord's Prayer recited listen out for the pauses after each petition. In particular, after 'Thy will be done'. In most cases it is divorced from the arena of action, 'in earth as it is Heaven'.

If we wanted to know why the Church has been so slow to acknowledge the sacredness of the natural world it may be because in our liturgy we literally distance the doing of God's sacred will from the theatre of the Earth. God's will is for the Earth so to mirror Heaven that ultimately there will be fusion of the two. The Lord's prayer is a petition for the earthing of Heaven which is the final vision to be found in the last book of the Bible, the Revelation to John.

Of that unique collection of sayings which explicitly link Jesus as the child of the Earth with the Earth the one that stands out is Matthew 12; 40.

“For just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the Earth.”

Matthew goes on to relate that prior to laying Jesus in the heart of the earth at his crucifixion the Earth shook (27;51,54) and then when the two Mary’s went to the tomb to grieve for him the Earth quaked again, this time to herald his Resurrection. The Earth was not silent as it received and gave up its own. The Temple Curtain tore only once, the Earth shook twice.

When the narrative shifts to the Gospel of John the earthiness of the Resurrection story continues with Mary mistaking the risen Jesus for the Gardener of Gethsemane. It is one of the ironies of the famously ironic Gospel of John that Mary Magdalene did actually see a gardener when she saw the Lord. It was the Gardener who planted a garden in Eden that she beheld, not the Gardener of Gethsemane. Throughout Scripture the Garden is a powerful motif and a symbol of the beauty of the Earth, the goodness of Creation and the sacredness of nature.

But for Matthew it is the Son of Man/Child of the Earth rather than the gardener who has the central role in ‘the renewal of all things’. Echoing imagery from the visions found in the prophetic Books of Ezekiel and Daniel of the Old Testament Matthew tells the reader that ‘all the tribes of the earth’, according to Jesus, “will see the Son of Man/Child of the Earth coming on the clouds of Heaven with power and great glory”. (Matthew 24;30). The earth that has been blighted by sin and evil will be renewed through the completion of the mission of the Son of Man, when at “the renewal of all things ... the Earth’s Child is seated on the throne of His glory,” (Matthew 19;28).

Walter Wink in his book 'Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of Man' recognises that uniquely and exclusively Jesus takes to himself the title 'Son of Man' but translates it as 'The Human Being'. His thesis is that the true Human Being is the perfect expression of God.

He does not explore the earthy dimension of the title unearthed by Lord Sacks but had he done so it would underline his contention that the unique role of the true 'Human Being', as personified by Jesus, is to reconcile Earth and Heaven. That is a theme amplified by St Paul who although never refers to Jesus as the 'Son of Man' nevertheless sees him as 'the icon of the invisible God' and destined 'to reconcile all things in himself'.

Having served for many years in Liverpool you'll forgive me if I draw upon a Beatles' song by way of illustration.

// John Lennon 'All I want is the truth just gimme some truth'.

In response to that age-old quest as to how we should then live on this earth, a question posed by poets, song-writers and philosophers, God gave us not just a poem or a song, not just a prophecy or a philosophy, not just a description or a prescription of how to live but in our search for the truth he gave us a true human being who taught us how to tread the earth with humility, justly and mercifully.

"What does the Lord require of you?" came the question through the prophet Micah, "But to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God."

Then came Jesus, the perfect human being, who did just that!

And from his very birth he showed us a different relationship with nature.

Have you ever wondered about the sign given by the angels to the shepherds? “You will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” The swaddling clothes were hardly the sign.

What marked out this infant was that he was put in an animal feeding trough! And so signalled a new relationship between humankind and the animal world. A totally new relationship within the natural order already hinted at by the prophets who sensed that in the new world that was coming even the wolf would lie down with the lamb. No longer would nature be ‘red in tooth and claw’.

In this season of Lent we recall Jesus’ testing time in the wilderness. The theologian Richard Bauckham draws attention to the detail that it was ‘the wild animals’ that kept Jesus company before the angels waited upon him. This is yet another subtle example of Jesus heralded a new relationship with nature and another intimation of the future kingdom.

St Paul used different words and phrases to describe the advent of this new world. In his letter to the Romans (Chapter 8) he wrote about ‘creation being subjected to futility’, about ‘the whole of creation ... groaning in labour pains until now’, about it ‘waiting with eager longing’, about ‘creation (being) set free from its bondage to decay’, and ‘not only creation but we ourselves’. Although writing 2000 years ago Paul identified the threats to creation which we in our own time would recognise in the many ways that humanity has consciously or unknowingly exploited and abused the natural world.

This very city is an example of how anthropogenic impacts on the natural world could have disastrous consequences. The River. In 1928 when the river burst its banks at Lambeth 14 people were killed and some 4000 were made homeless. In the 1980s shortly after the Thames Barrier was constructed it was raised 4 times to protect London from further flooding and saved the lives and homes of countless residents.



But if that were a warning of future catastrophe it was but a whimper to the shout that was sounded in the 1990s when the Barrier was raised over 30 times. Since the year 2000 it has gone up over 200 times and with each raising we are challenged to think again about our relationship with the natural world. If the City of London and the Palace of Westminster, the centres of finance and power, had been flooded as many times as the Thames Barrier has been raised we surely would have legislated to conform our behaviour to the dynamics of nature. The fact that we have not done so is a tragic sign that we still see ourselves existing apart from nature rather than as a part of nature.

On the theme of sacred nature from a faith perspective there is more that I would wish to say but perhaps these aspects that I have omitted might provide prompts for the contributions that will follow from yourselves especially the role of the King in stirring the conscience both nationally and internationally on how we must learn to live in harmony with nature, the influence of the Christian Right in America in undermining responsibility for caring for God's Creation, and the importance of Jews, Christians and Muslims forming an alliance, even a Concord for Nature, between themselves and with other faiths to urge believers to discover common and holy ground in living as a part of sacred nature and not apart from it.

But I end with a story and a poem that goes back and deep into our history. In Bede's 8<sup>th</sup> Century Ecclesiastical History of the English People he tells the story of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century monk and poet, Caedmon.

Caedmon fell asleep in a stable while on night duty looking after the animals. In a dream he was bidden to sing a song. When he confessed that he didn't know how or what to sing the figure in the dream commanded Caedmon to sing to him and to "Sing about the Creation of All things". What followed is the first poem in the English language.

It is a poem about wisdom, wonders and the world-warden; it is about the Earth and Heaven and the trees; it is about nature and the Fashioner who made all things sacred.

PRAISE WE THE FASHIONER NOW OF HEAVEN'S FABRIC,  
THE MAJESTY OF HIS MIGHT AND HIS MIND'S WISDOM  
WORK OF THE WORLD-WARDEN, WORKER OF ALL WONDERS  
HOW HE THE LORD OF GLORY EVERLASTING,  
WROUGHT FIRST FOR THE RACE OF MEN HEAVEN AS A ROOFTREE  
THEN MADE HE MIDDLE EARTH TO BE THEIR MANSION.

The Right Reverend Bishop James Jones KBE

7<sup>th</sup> March 2024