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LENTEN BIBLE STUDY 2020



Caring for the Garden of the Earth

A 5-PART BIBLE STUDY BY **MARGARET DALY-DENTON**

EDITED BY GINNIE KENNERLEY

'Caring for the Garden of the Earth'

Lent 2020 Bible Studies

The tenth Bible Study resource offered by BACI

This five-part study guide draws on Margaret Daly-Denton's book,
John: An Earth Bible Commentary: Supposing Him to be the Gardener
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Read with an awareness of our ecological crisis, John's account of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand offers new insights to Christian believers today.

INTRODUCTION

‘Caring for the Garden of the Earth.’

GIVEN the climate-change crisis facing the world today, BACI invited the noted scripture scholar Margaret Daly-Denton to present a series of Bible Studies for Lent 2020 on the theme of ‘Caring for Creation’. In response, she introduces us here to creation-centred scriptures which would have been familiar to Jesus and which she sees as underlying the Gospel of John. In this gospel, she points out, ‘we find the story of Jesus doing the work of God in the world and inviting his disciples to share in that work’. Her book ‘John: an Earth Bible Commentary’ (Bloomsbury T&T Clark 2017) will be helpful to those who wish to go into further detail.

Not all the creation-affirming spirituality in this Gospel is explicit, but Daly-Denton encourages us, as we seek to ‘perform the works of God’ at this critical time, to depend on Jesus’ promise: ‘The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.’ (John.14.26) She writes: ‘Down the centuries, followers of Jesus in very different circumstances from those of the early believers have found in John’s gospel a template for their response to the challenges of their day. We pray that we too may discover in John’s portrayal of Jesus a Christian way of responding to the plight of our earth home.’ In so doing may we be led to ‘safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth’, as urged by the Anglican Communion’s fifth Mark of Mission.

It may surprise some that, among the Scripture readings lying behind the Gospel of John, two passages from the Wisdom of Solomon have been selected. Because this book was written in Greek, the 16th century reformers, unlike the Eastern and Roman Catholic Churches, did not accept it as biblical. However passages from Wisdom are now included in the Revised Common Lectionary and it is used here to illustrate the interpretation of earlier creation-centred Scriptures by Greek-speaking Jews in the 1st century AD.

We are particularly grateful to Dr Daly-Denton for offering this insightful and challenging Bible Study series at this time of ecological crisis. Regular users of the BACI Lent materials will find ‘Caring for the Garden of the Earth’ a little more demanding than our recent Lent Studies, the usual ‘Notes’ being in this case incorporated into the main text; so those leading study groups will be wise to prepare each session in some detail. The thoughts offered for discussion towards the end of each session will prompt leaders and participants alike to their own reflections – and resolutions. BACI will be grateful to receive your feed-back, as will Margaret Daly-Denton. Please incorporate the closing prayers into your group’s preferred style of devotion.

Ginnie Kennerley for BACI

1. 'WHAT MUST WE DO TO PERFORM THE WORKS OF GOD?' (John 6.28)

A few thoughts

TURNING to the Gospel of John in the context of our present ecological crisis, we naturally identify with the crowd's question to Jesus: 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' The evangelist gives no specifically ecological answer, but as we immerse ourselves in the story of Jesus doing God's work and inviting us to share in the work, we will learn how to do the fresh thinking, urgent praying and creative engagement that are all part of 'performing the works of God' in our world today.

More than any of the other gospel writers, the Fourth Evangelist draws on the Scriptures to tell us about Jesus (John 5:19). It is obvious from the gospel that it was by studying them that the early disciples came to understand who Jesus really was and what he was doing (2:17; 20:9). In fact, the evangelist sets the story of Jesus within the whole sweep of the biblical story that tells in narrative, poem, song and vision of God's design for the creation, a plan that was eventually to include the creating and sustaining Word becoming flesh (1:14).

But there is another reason why an earth-conscious reading of the Fourth Gospel must be attentive to the Scriptures. These writings draw us into Jesus' own Israelite reading of 'The Book of the Creation', the world around us. He shared the Jewish conviction that something of the invisible God can be seen by humankind if they look at what God has created. The Fourth Gospel takes this basic tenet of Jewish faith even further when features of the natural world such as 'living water' (John 4:10) or 'the light of the world' (8:12) become symbols of Jesus. In these Lenten studies, therefore, we will try to look at biblical readings of 'The Book of the Creation', through the eyes of the Fourth Evangelist.

When we see the harm that we have done to our planet and wonder how we can ever hope to repair it, we can feel overwhelmed. So often when we try to make some aspect of our lifestyle more sustainable, we find that we are just doing a different kind of damage to the earth. The magnitude of the task ahead of us can paralyse us. At moments like this, the risen Jesus says to us, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you ... Receive the Holy Spirit' (John 20:21-22). That means that we are commissioned to do the work of God that Jesus did, and even, as he promised 'greater works' (14:12).

It also means that the creating Spirit that brought everything into existence in the first place (Gen. 1:2) and that continually enlivens the whole creation is given to us 'without measure' (John 3:34).

Readings

Psalm 19

This is a hymn of praise for the gift of the two 'books' that reveal God: the 'Book of the Creation' that shows us God at work in our world and the Book of the Scriptures that alerts us to our ecological errors and encourages us to tread more lightly on the earth.

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.

The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.
Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.
Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Wisdom 13:1-11

The Wisdom of Solomon was written in Greek, probably between 30 BC to 70 AD, by an unknown Jew living in Egypt. The book opens a window for us on the interpretation of the Scriptures by Greek-speaking Jews in the decades that preceded the composition of the Gospel of John.

For all people who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know the one who exists, nor did they recognise the artisan while paying heed to his works; but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world.

If through delight in the beauty of these things people assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them. And if people were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is the one who formed them.

For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.

Yet these people are little to be blamed, for perhaps they go astray while seeking God and desiring to find him. For while they live among his works, they keep searching, and they trust in what they see, because the things that are seen are beautiful.

Yet again, not even they are to be excused; for if they had the power to know so much that they could investigate the world, how did they fail to find sooner the Lord of these things?

But miserable, with their hopes set on dead things, are those who give the name 'gods' to the works of human hands, gold and silver fashioned with skill, and likenesses of animals, or a useless stone, the work of an ancient hand.

For Discussion

- As Christians, it is natural for us to presume that we are not idolaters. Should we reconsider this?
- The author of The Book of Wisdom thinks that there is no excuse for people who are intelligent enough to investigate the world yet cannot see that it all belongs to God to whom they are answerable for the way they use it. Just because we have the technology to modify the natural processes of the earth, do we have the right to do so?
- In John's gospel we frequently sense Jesus's own reading of 'The Book of the Creation.' When, for example, he realises that the hour of his death is near, he says, 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.' (John 12:24). What does this saying, coming as it does out of Jesus' own observation of the way the creation works, suggest to us when viewed from an ecological perspective?
- The Jewish belief that everything in the creation reveals something of God is at the heart of the Fourth Gospel. Take water, for example. We need to drink from a gushing spring to understand Jesus' gift of 'eternal life' (John 4:13-14). We need to see a river in full flow to sense the generosity of God's gift of the Holy Spirit (7:38-39). But when water is neither abundant nor clean, how can it say what the Creator intended?

Prayer

Ps. 98:4-9 (ICEL version)

Shout to the Lord, you earth,
break into song, into praise!
Sing praise to God with a harp,
with a harp and the sound of music.
with sound of trumpet and horn,
Shout to the Lord, our king.

Let the sea roar with its creatures,
the world and all that live there!
Let rivers clap their hands,
the hills ring out their joy!
The Lord our God comes,
comes to rule the earth,
justly to rule the world,
to govern the peoples aright.

Glory to the Father ...

2. SUPPOSING HIM TO BE THE GARDENER **(John 20:15)**

A few thoughts

WHEN Mary Magdalene supposed that the risen Jesus was the gardener, she was mistaken at the 'surface' level of the narrative, yet at a deeper level she was full of insight. Over the centuries, artists depicting Mary's encounter with the risen Jesus have sensed this depth of meaning and have shown him carrying a gardening implement, as in the Fra Angelico cover of this booklet, from San Marco in Florence.

Before looking at what it might mean to suggest that Jesus is the gardener, we need to consider the garden itself. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus goes after the last supper either to 'a place called Gethsemane' (Matt 26:36; Mark 14:32) or to the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39). In John's gospel only, he goes to 'a place where there was a garden' (John 18:1). The Christian memory has combined all of this information into 'the Garden of Gethsemane.' John tells us that Jesus often met in a garden with his disciples (18:2). The servant of the High Priest challenges Peter, 'Did I not see you in the garden with him?' (18:26). Later in the story we find the garden mentioned twice in one sentence. 'Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid... (19:41). It is there that Mary sees the risen Jesus and supposes that he is the gardener (20:15). The Evangelist certainly does not want that garden to go unnoticed!

The garden just outside Jerusalem is highly symbolic as the burial place of the kings of Judah. However, rather than expecting us to work out its exact location and whether this is the same garden as the place of Jesus' arrest, the evangelist invites us to delve deeper, to exercise our memory of what the Scriptures have to say about gardens. The most famous garden in the Bible is surely Eden. By reminding us of Paradise, the evangelist helps us to understand that Jesus' resurrection is a re-making of the world, a new creation. Jesus is the new Adam. His saving work brings about a fresh start for the world, a renewal of the creation, restoring it to what the Creator intended for it. And now, in Jesus' disciples, humankind can be seen 'in the garden with him' (John 18:26), working again at their original task: to care for the garden of the Earth (Gen. 2:15). Provided, of course, that we work well in the garden of the earth, respecting the God-given way that the creation functions and

collaborating with it! To interpret the garden in this way is in keeping with numerous passages in the Scriptures where the promised restoration of Israel is described as a re-admission of humankind to Eden.

The Easter garden where a woman reaches out to a man also recalls the springtime garden setting for the Song of Solomon. In John's gospel, Jesus, the Bridegroom (John 3: 29) models the divine love for Israel, God's 'bride.' Jesus' death and resurrection took place at Passover time, the original Jewish New Year festival, a seasonal feast that celebrated the springtime renewal of the land while recalling Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt. Like the Exodus as described by the author of the Wisdom of Solomon, the passing of Jesus 'from this world to the Father' (13:1) meant that 'the whole creation in its nature was fashioned anew' (Wis.19:6). This Johannine vision of Jesus as the agent of creation's renewal energises us his disciples to work for the healing and sustaining of the earth.

Readings

Genesis 2:4-9.15

This second creation story in Genesis, quite different from the first (Gen. 1:1-2:4), is one of a variety of biblical attempts to explain the origin of the world. Elsewhere, for example, creation is the defeat of a great sea monster (Ps. 89:8-11), a birthing process (Job 38:8), or an incredible feat of architecture and engineering (Prov. 8:24-31; Ps. 104:3-5).

In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up -- for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground -- then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil... The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

Song of Solomon 2:10-13

In both Jewish and Christian interpretation, the Song of Solomon has been seen, not only as a celebration of human love, but as a portrayal of God's love. Springtime offers a revelation of God's work in the world. Once again, God's breath/spirit is breathed out, renewing the face of the earth (Ps. 104:30).

My beloved speaks and says to me:

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;

for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.

The flowers appear on the earth;

the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

The fig tree puts forth its figs,

and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my fair one,

and come away.

Isaiah 51:3

Isaiah depicts the promised restoration of Israel as a reversal of the banishment of humankind from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:23-24).

For the LORD will comfort Zion;

he will comfort all her waste places,
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the LORD;

joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song. (Isa. 51:3)

For Discussion

- God put the man into the garden 'to till it and keep it' (Gen. 2:15). In early Jewish commentary on this verse, we read that God spent seven years teaching both Adam and Eve how to garden well. 'Till' translates the Hebrew word *abad* which means 'to serve.' 'Keep' translates the Hebrew word *shamar* which means to preserve. Gardening requires knowledge and care. If we garden irresponsibly, we are 'destroyers of the earth'. (Rev. 11:18).
- In our home in the northern hemisphere of the earth, as Easter draws near and the signs of spring appear around us, what are we reading in 'The Book of the Creation'?
- In one of his visions of restoration and renewal, Isaiah wrote of swords and spears being beaten into ploughshares and pruning hooks (Isa. 2:4). How does this vision of weapons becoming gardening tools speak to us when we consider the reality of war in our world today and the ecological devastation that it causes?
- To be seen in the garden with Jesus is to be recognised as his disciple (John 18:26). What can we do to make our church properties real expressions of this?

Prayer

Based on Ps. 104:30-31.34

Loving God,
you breathe on all creation
and renew the face of the earth.
May your glory endure forever;
May you always delight in creating.
May our thoughts be pleasing to you
For we find our joy in you.

Glory to the Father ...

3. 'MY FATHER IS STILL WORKING AND I ALSO AM WORKING' (John 5:17)

A few thoughts

WHEN Jesus heals the man lying beside the pool of Beth-zatha (John 5:1-18), he is reprimanded by certain Jews for doing such things on the Sabbath. Jesus replies, 'My Father is still working and I also am working' (5:17). This answer comes straight out of the Israelite view of creation as an ongoing divine activity, a continually overflowing 'fountain of life.' (Ps. 36:8-9). God performs the work of creation more like a singer continuing her song than a sculptor making a work and then walking away from it. The idea is that of the creating God, constantly sustaining everything in cherished being. The Wisdom of Solomon sees this ongoing work of God's wisdom as 'reaching mightily from one end of the earth to the other, ordering all things well' (Wis. 8:1).

When in John's gospel Jesus describes himself as the true vine (John 15:1), he also speaks of his Father's role in the vineyard. Our NRSV translation has, 'My Father is the vine-grower'. God is indeed the vine-grower who transplanted his choice vine from Egypt to Israel (Ps. 80:8; Isa. 5:1-7; Jer. 2:21) but there is much more to this designation. The evangelist's original word is *gēorgos*. It means a farmer, a gardener or, more literally, a worker on/with the land (from the Greek words, *gē*: land/earth; *ergon*: work). Obviously, the gardener is one of many roles that the biblical writers attribute metaphorically to God in their attempts to describe the inexpressible. It is an image of God that can inspire us today, at this time of ecological crisis, as we try to think, plan, act and pray as disciples of Jesus. We need to do more and better gardening, the primary human work that is a sharing in the life-giving ways of God.

We have already seen God the gardener at work, planting a garden in Eden (Gen. 2:8). When ancient Near Eastern people imagined this garden, they would have thought of a royal paradise garden, a large walled park or estate full of exotic, fragrant trees and shrubs.¹ Among the original audience for the gospel there would have been people who had heard about the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon. When they read in Isaiah about God measuring the waters in the hollow of his hand and weighing out the amounts of soil required to make mountains and hills (Isa. 40:12) or in the Psalms about God making springs gush forth in the valleys (Ps. 104:10), they would immediately understand the Creator as what we would call a landscape gardener. Water

¹ The word *paradeisos* used in the Greek translation of the Bible for the Garden of Eden in Gen 2:8 comes from Persian *paridaida* meaning a royal walled park.

features were vital if a garden was to flourish in the hot, arid climate of the ancient Near East. Royal paradises depended on irrigation systems that brought water from distant springs, raising it to the top of the garden's stone structures so that it could flow down into its numerous pools. Typically, the water would be released 'at the time of the evening breeze' when the king would enjoy a walk in his garden (see Gen. 3:8).

This brings up the issue of the ongoing care of the garden without which it would wither away. At the time the gospel was written there was discussion among Jewish rabbis about how the world could continue to exist if God were really to rest on the Sabbath. They read in Genesis that God finished the work of creation and then rested (Gen. 2: 2), but elsewhere in the Scriptures they found that the divine activity of sustaining the creation is continual and even unfinished, because God has promised to create 'new heavens and a new earth' (Isa. 65.17; 66.22). If God's work is ongoing and has still to be completed, they argued, then God does not rest on the Sabbath.

The rabbis also noticed that in Genesis 2:2-3, unlike the previous six days, the Sabbath has no evening. So this endless day with no night, became a symbol of the future age when people would no longer need sunlight, moonlight or lamp light, because God would be their light (Isa. 60.19-20; see also Rev. 21.23; 22.5). In the synoptic gospels, this new aeon of God's definitive rule is called the kingdom of God, but John prefers another term for the new epoch, 'eternal life', which occurs seventeen times in this gospel. For us, the word 'eternal' gives a misleading impression of everlasting time. The word 'eternal' is an attempt to translate *aiōnios*, an adjective from the Greek word *aiōn*, that gives us our English word 'aeon' or age. This has important ecological implications. In John's gospel, Jesus insists that believers in him have eternal life here and now, that they already live the life of the promised aeon-to-come, (John 3:36, 5:24, 6:47, 17:3). Thinking of this in an earth-conscious mode, we can see that we are called to live the life of the newly re-created world, restored by Jesus' resurrection to what the Creator intended it to be.

When people practise Sabbath rest, they experience this 'eternal life.' Sabbath is thus much more than a weekly observance, it is an attitude, a mind-set that should pervade all of a Jewish or Christian person's life. When, therefore, Jesus says, 'My Father is still working and I also am working,' he is claiming not only that he is doing the work that God has sent him to do (John 4:34), but also that his life-giving work brings to fulfilment the whole point of the Sabbath.

It will help us to think all of this through from an ecological perspective, if we look at some biblical passages that show how the people of Israel viewed the Sabbath.

Readings

Exodus 16: 22-30

The idea that Sabbath rest imitates the rest of God after the six days of creation (Exod. 20: 8-11) corresponds to the meaning of the Hebrew 'shabat', to stop, to cease. This is one of the ways the Jewish people understood the Sabbath. This excerpt from the story of the manna presents the Sabbath as a day to know and celebrate that one has enough and to resist the temptation to accumulate more.

On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers apiece. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, he said to them, 'This is what the LORD has commanded: Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the LORD; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.' So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. Moses said, 'Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none.'

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

In Deuteronomy the Sabbath recalls the Exodus and therefore involves granting liberation to the enslaved. The easing of the burden of work on the Sabbath applies not only to humans, but to animals. (see also Exod. 20.10).

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Leviticus 25:1-7

In Leviticus, the Sabbath rest is extended to the land.

The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: 'Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the LORD. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year

there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. You may eat what the land yields during its Sabbath -- you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you; for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food.

For Discussion

- Disciples of Jesus are sent, as he was sent, to perform 'their labour until the evening' (Ps. 104:23). Whatever they can do – whether by influencing policymakers to implement big sustainability projects, or by the small gestures of waste avoidance, energy saving or recycling – they are doing 'the work of God' (John 6:28).
- In our privileged 'one-third-world', practising sabbath will involve resisting the efforts of advertisers to persuade us that we need more. The consumer model depends on people being discontented and restless. The sabbath way is to stop, and to rest in joy and peace, because we have enough and all is 'very good' (Gen. 1:31).
- The prophet Amos denounces traders who skimp the measure, boost the price and cheat with dishonest scales and who say, 'When will the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?' (Amos. 8.5). Does this sound contemporary?

Prayer

From Ps. 65: 9:13 and Ps. 104:31

Creating God,
you visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.
You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.

You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with
richness.
The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,
the meadows clothe themselves with
flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.

Glory to the Father ...

4. GOD, THE LOVER OF LIFE (Wis. 12:1)

A few thoughts

GOD so loved the world (Greek: *kosmos*) that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (John 3:16). Some of us, at least, would probably admit that before we started reading the Bible from an ecological perspective we would have read what is possibly the most well-loved verse of John's gospel in an anthropocentric way: presuming that it is about God's love for humanity and not noticing that it speaks of a love that embraces the entire cosmos.

John 3:16 is not an isolated case. Jesus is 'Saviour of the world' (John 4:42), not just of the people in it. In a saying that recalls God bringing all the animals to Adam (Gen. 2:19-20; see also Ps. 8:6-8) Jesus declares that the Father has placed all things into his hands (John 3.35; 13.3). Lifted up from the Earth, drawing all things to himself (12.32), ²Jesus brings everything that lives - plant, animal, human - within the ambit of God's creating and sustaining influence. Our climate emergency is surely telling us that this is the work that Jesus models and sends his disciples to do.

When we read John 1:14, 'The Word became flesh and lived among us' with a consciousness of our membership of the whole earth community, we must surely ask who or what we mean by 'us' and how we understand the word 'flesh.' Up until now, we have presumed that becoming 'flesh' simply meant becoming a human being. The ecological crisis is teaching us that we belong to an intricately interconnected community of life. So what do we mean by flesh? Does it mean just that the divine Word became a human being? Could we think of what the Bible calls 'all flesh' (e.g. Gen. 6:13; Job 34:14-15; Ps. 145:21)? That would mean that the divine Word became part of the whole biosphere that includes all life - human, animal and plant - all that shares the same distant origin in the dust of exploding stars.

When Jesus said to his disciples, 'Love one another as I have loved you' he was addressing the small community of his disciples. But over the centuries, Christians have always interpreted 'one another' more broadly as a reference to the whole human community. Now that the ecological crisis is teaching us that we are part of an even wider community, are we perhaps called to re-think our understanding of 'one another'? As the Holy Spirit reminds us of Jesus' words, are we being prompted to extend the circle of our love to include the whole Earth community? If so, this will involve some form of laying down of our lives for our more-than-human friends (John 15:13).

²The ancient manuscripts of the gospel disagree about whether Jesus said 'all things' or 'all people.' Traditional translations give us 'all men' or 'all people,' but a strong case can be made for 'all things.'

Jesus prayed that the disciples and those who will come to faith in him through their word might be one (John 17.11, 20-21), just as he and the Father are one (10.30). This vision of unity cannot but speak to us today of what is perhaps the most important lesson that we are learning as our ecological awareness develops: the interconnectedness of everything on Earth. In keeping with our Earth-conscious reading of the evangelist's expressions 'all things' and 'all flesh' as inclusive of the more-than-human, it is equally valid to hear 'that they may all be one' as people who need to relearn that they are part of a unity. We (western) humans have, over several centuries now, been living by a myth that we are somehow separate from and even superior to what we have until quite recently been thoughtlessly calling 'the natural world'. As if we were not part of it ourselves! This distancing of ourselves from what we named 'nature'—an intellectual construct with no basis in reality—has permitted us to become the parasitic and predatory force that we are in the Earth. This is what the Johannine Jesus would call not standing in the truth and, as he makes clear, it results in the quenching of life (John 8:44). If Jesus' twenty-first century disciples are to be 'sanctified in the truth' as Jesus prays they will be (17.19), they have much learning to do about relatedness and interconnectedness.

Readings

Our Scripture readings for this session all bring out in various ways God's desire for the flourishing not just of humanity but of the whole creation.

In the Fourth Gospel, we encounter 'the friend of the bridegroom . . . rejoicing greatly at the sound of the bridegroom's voice' (John 3:29). Conversely, Jeremiah lamented the disappearance of this jubilant sound from Israel at the time of the Babylonian exile, which brought about a kind of 'Silent Spring,' a 'desertification' of the land of Israel. By contrast Jeremiah's soundscape for the restoration includes not only that of human celebrations voices, but even the baaing of sheep.

Jeremiah 33:10-13

Thus says the LORD: In this place of which you say, 'It is a waste without human beings or animals,' in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without inhabitants, human or animal, there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD: 'Give thanks to the LORD of hosts, for the LORD is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!' For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: In this place that is waste, without human beings or animals, and in all its towns there shall again be pasture for shepherds resting their flocks . . . in the towns of Judah, flocks shall again pass under the hands of the one who counts them, says the LORD.

Wisdom 11:24-12:1

The Fourth Gospel teaches that in Jesus God sent the Word through which everything was created to become flesh in our world (John 1:1-2). This description of the Creator rejoicing in his works (cf. Ps. 104:31), is a powerful antidote to our anthropocentric tendencies.

For you love all things that exist,
and detest none of the things that you have made,
for you would not have made anything if you had hated it.
How would anything have endured if you had not willed it?
Or how would anything not called forth by you have been preserved?
You spare all things, for they are yours,
O Lord, you who love the living.
For your immortal spirit is in all things.

Job 39:1-12

The divine speeches in the Book of Job (Job 38-41) are among the greatest literary classics. Here is a brief sample of their compelling challenge to human pretensions of mastery over the rest of the creation and their delightful portrayal of the 'hands on,' creating God.

'Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?
Do you observe the calving of the deer?
Can you number the months that they fulfill,
and do you know the time when they give birth,
when they crouch to give birth to their offspring,
and are delivered of their young?
Their young ones become strong, they grow up in the open;
they go forth, and do not return to them.

'Who has let the wild ass go free?
Who has loosed the bonds of the swift ass,
to which I have given the steppe for its home,
the salt land for its dwelling place?
It scorns the tumult of the city;
it does not hear the shouts of the driver.
It ranges the mountains as its pasture,
and it searches after every green thing.

'Is the wild ox willing to serve you?
Will it spend the night at your crib?
Can you tie it in the furrow with ropes,
or will it harrow the valleys after you?

Will you depend on it because its strength is great,
and will you hand over your labor to it?
Do you have faith in it that it will return,
and bring your grain to your threshing floor?'

For Discussion

- Think of some of the ways that Christians throughout the ages have responded to Jesus' new commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you' (John 13:34). What shape might a contemporary ecological response to this commandment take?
- In John's gospel, Jesus' says that there can be no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friend (15:13). The verb 'to lay down' (*tithēmi*) could also be translated 'to take one's life in one's hand,' (v.1 Sam:19:5) or 'to put one's life on the line,' so it does not necessarily imply actually dying. Think of how followers of Jesus throughout Christian history have shown themselves to be that kind of friend. Since our more-than-human earth-kin are our friends, surely our love for them must be so great that we are prepared to give of ourselves, even to put our lives on the line, for their flourishing.
- John 3.16 would certainly imply that believers' love should be as broad as God's love for the whole cosmos. To the extent that we embrace our membership of the whole earth community and act lovingly within it, we will share in God's creating work.
- Because everything is linked in some way, a small act of environmental irresponsibility can have an unimaginably serious 'butterfly effect.' We might think, for example, of the build-up of micro-plastics in the world's seas and consequently in the food web, as a result of numerous small acts of carelessness in the disposal of waste. However, the interconnected unity of the creation also points to a positive, earth-healing, cumulative effect when many people make apparently insignificant lifestyle choices out of love for the world.

Prayer

From Ps. 24:1; Ps. 145:9-10

Creating God,
the earth is yours and all that is in it,
the world and those who live in it.

You are good to all

and your compassion is over everything
you have made.

All your works shall give thanks to you,
O Lord,
and all your faithful shall bless you.

Glory to the Father ...

5. JESUS FEEDS FIVE THOUSAND PEOPLE (John 6:1-14)

A few thoughts

SO FAR in our study sessions we have been looking at certain sayings of the Johannine Jesus and their scriptural underlay. We have found that when we explore the biblical tradition that has so obviously helped the evangelist to understand who Jesus really was and what he was doing, that a comprehensive vision of God's creating and sustaining love for the whole creation emerges.

In this session we are going to read John 6:1-14, while purposefully making of our contemporary ecological crisis a context or a situation in which to listen to it. If we can do this, we may well discover things that we have never noticed before. It is not that we are trying to claim that the Fourth Evangelist was an ecologist. It is rather a matter of tapping into the capacity of our sacred writings to speak a relevant word to believers in every age. As disciples breathed on and sent by Jesus (John 20:21-22), we can be confident that the Holy Spirit will remind us what Jesus said and help us apply it to the issues that we face today. The Fourth Gospel was written so that its audience might share its author's faith (John 20:31). Our engagement with John's text in this series of Bible studies latches on to that motivational dimension of the gospel and channels it in an ecological direction.

Reading

John 6:1-14

This is the only miracle of Jesus recounted in all four gospels (Mk. 6:32-44; Mt. 14:13-21; Lk. 9:11-17). John's account has several unique features. The scene takes place near the 'Sea of Galilee' (actually a lake) but John also uses the colonial name given to it in honour of the Roman Emperor, the Sea of Tiberias. For us, this underscores the hubris of the imperial claim to ownership of natural resources, in this case, a lake teeming with biodiversity, but seen by some only as potential for tribute and tax revenue.

It is Passover time. The winter rains are over and now beautiful wild flowers (Song 2:11-12) fleck the lush green grass where Jesus invites the people to recline (Ps. 23:1-2). The barley bread is unique to John. It recalls Elisha's miraculous feeding of a large crowd (2 Kings 4:42-44). It is also a realistic touch. This was the seasonal local food, as spring barley was the first grain crop to ripen. It was also much cheaper than wheat, so barley bread was the food of the poor (see Rev. 6:6). Uniquely in John, Jesus himself hands the

food to the people. Finally, while all four gospels tell of the twelve baskets of surplus food, in John it is Jesus who takes the initiative in telling the disciples to gather up the left over fragments. He also explains why: 'so that nothing may be lost.'

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?' Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

For Discussion

- The willingness of a young boy to share the little he had was instrumental in satisfying the crowd's hunger. As Mohandas Gandhi is remembered for saying, 'The Earth has enough for everyone's need but not for their greed.' The crowd's hunger cannot but remind us of people who lack food security in today's world, a problem set to be exacerbated by climate change and biodiversity loss. We need to face up to the repercussions of our voracious life-style.
- To give thanks for a meal, to 'say grace,' as Jesus did (John 6.11), is to be conscious of our dependence on all the human gardening work and all the processes of the more-than-human creation that have combined to provide the food that sustains us so delightfully. For many people, the act of eating has degenerated into fuel consumption, promoted by marketing labels like 'Grab and Go'. Food should be relished as a manifestation of the Creator's provisioning care, to be seen, smelt, savoured and enjoyed, ideally in an atmosphere of conviviality and hospitality.

- Jesus' twenty-first century disciples, living in a world where food is wasted by a privileged minority while the majority go hungry every day, might find themselves salutarily reproached by the command of Jesus to gather up the surplus 'that nothing may be lost' (John 6.12). Perhaps this command might also challenge his followers' acceptance of 'built in obsolescence' and inspire them to see recycling as part of their alignment of their lives with Wisdom's way.
- People on a mission, as Jesus was, must be imaginative, resourceful and creative. Like Andrew (John 6:9), we admit the scantiness of the lifestyle changes we are only now beginning to make, compared with the vastness of the danger. The story of what happened to that young boy's lunch encourages us to believe that even small gestures of ecological citizenship can become part of the great 'work of God' that Jesus calls us to do.

Prayer

Ps. 104:24. 27-28. 31

Lord, how manifold are your works!

In wisdom you have made them all.

The eyes of all creatures look to you
to give them their food in due season.

When you open your hand,
they are filled with good things.

May the glory of the Lord endure for ever.

May the Lord rejoice in his works.

Glory to the Father ...

CONCLUSION

We conclude with two quotations. The first is from Norman Wirzba, a theologian who has thought deeply about many of the issues that we have discussed in this study series:

Gardening work creates in us an indispensable 'imaginary' that enables us to think, feel and act in the world with greater awareness for life's complexity and depth. Gardens are the concentrated and focused places where people discover and learn about life's creativity and interdependence. Insofar as we are good gardeners we will commit to working with God's creativity in ways that strengthen human and nonhuman life together. When we garden poorly or recklessly, we will inevitably lay waste the world.³

The second is from The Earth Charter:

As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning...Let ours be a time remembered for the wakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life.⁴

A LAST READING:

Isaiah 55: 10-11

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

³ N. Wirzba, *Food & Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.37.

⁴ *The Earth Charter*, The Hague, 29 June 2000, cited in *Laudato Si'*, 207.

Prayers to open and close our Bible Study

*Holy Spirit of God,
accompany us as we study the scriptures,
inspire us to discern and to do the works of God,
comfort us when we fail or fall,
and guide us on the way that leads to all the truth.
We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

*God our Father,
you never cease the work you have begun
and prosper with your blessing all human labour:
make us wise and faithful stewards of your gifts
that we may serve the common good,
maintain the fabric of our world
and seek that justice where all may share
the good things you pour upon us;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

BACI LENTEN BIBLE STUDIES 2020

Caring for the Garden of the Earth



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