

an ecological reading of the gospel of mark

In the ninth part in this series Elaine Wainwright reads Mark 11:1-10; 15-19 showing how the carnival-like story-telling upends the usual order and draws readers into a different world.

Elaine Wainwright

Ched Myers says that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in Mark 11:1-10 resembles "carefully choreographed street theatre". It turns the world upside down in ways that upset or disturb, especially those with political, economic or social power. We can extend this claim of the carnivalesque, or upturning of worlds, to Mark 11:15-19 — Jesus' "cleansing" of the temple. We participate in such upturning of worlds, decentring the human and attending to the other-than-human — place, space, animals and built environments that abound in these texts when we read ecologically. We discover habitat, human and holy as profoundly intertwined. Our way of seeing needs to be turned upside-down though so that we learn to attend to habitat.

In the opening verse Mark (11:1), grounds the story and us as readers in location, calling our attention to habitat. We can imagine the dusty and well-worn path that brings those travelling from Jericho to Jerusalem "near to the Mount of Olives". As its name suggests, this eastern ridge reached before entering the city would have been covered with fruit-bearing olive trees. The text draws the ecological reader even more profoundly into the material locations: at Bethphage and Bethany. Both were small villages or built environments, alive with human and other-than-human inhabitants engaged in life.

colt not war-horse

An element of the carnivalesque emerges as Jesus seems to send the disciples on their errand to secure a colt from both villages — from Bethphage and from Bethany. The atmosphere builds with Jesus assuming the right to use the colt which he does not own.

An ecological reader, perhaps like Mark's original readers, will be tantalised by the reference to the "colt" in this story. The Greek word *pólos* can designate the young of any animal. When it stands alone, as it does in this narrative, it generally refers to the colt of a horse but other possibilities play in the ecological texture of this passage.

In the first century Graeco-Roman world and its centres of power, the war-horse carried a victorious king, emperor

or general triumphantly into a city to claim it as his prize. The carnivalesque is at work when Jesus chooses a colt that no one had ever ridden, so still quite young, rather than a full-grown war horse. However the enactment of carnival does not obscure the materiality of the animal. Both function together in this text read ecologically and invite readers to reflect on the human-animal interrelationship. Both are full and active players in the unfolding drama of life.

upending the expected order

The carnival enactment reaches its climax in Mk 11:7-8. This is made possible through the extraordinary agency of the material elements in this story. The disciples bring the colt to Jesus and put their garments on it, mirroring the



splendid blankets on the horse of the triumphant Roman general or king as he entered his city. Other material elements are also out of place. The crowds spread cloaks or clothing on the road and take leafy branches from trees and lay them on the road. The world is being turned upside down. This continues as the crowds that go before and follow Jesus cry out with “hymns and acclamations” in a way that mimics the triumphant entry accompanying a king or a general. Multiple material elements participate with the human actors in this drama that parodies the religious and political powers residing in Jerusalem who will be aligned against Jesus as the narrative unfolds rapidly.

bodies and habitat

We find elements of the carnival in Mk 11:15-19 as Jesus’ actions on the temple mount continue to upturn the prevailing world. Readers see Jesus entering the temple mount and creating mayhem, acting in ways he was not authorised to in the prevailing order of the religious and cultural society. This text is characterised by bodies “in-place” and “out-of-place”. It opens into a network of time and space in which the human, in particular the character Jesus in all his bodiliness, and habitat are woven together in complex ways in the text.

The first evidence of this is that the word “temple” occurs three times within the first two verses of the scene, drawing the reader into the material setting. It evokes the temple built of massive Jerusalem stone, constructed as part of Herod’s grandiose building programme in Jerusalem. It was the domain of ritual or cultic practices presided over by Jerusalem’s priestly aristocracy, predominantly the high priest, chief priests and Sadducees. These formed the Jewish elite who controlled the temple and also occupied the wealthy houses that archaeologists have uncovered on the western slope opposite the temple. Political and religious power finds expression in the material elements encoded in the narrative. The lone Jesus confronts this privilege — indeed overturns it.

different world possible

We find ourselves as readers of Mk 11:15-16 in the midst of bodies and birds, tables and stools. Jesus casts out those named as “buying and selling” in the temple just as he cast out demons — so adding to the carnival. Human bodies are caught up in this melee that Jesus is creating with the money-changers’ material tables and the stools or seats of those selling doves (the fate of the doves themselves is not visible in the text). This is indeed carnival. Through these actions Jesus is re-ordering the economic, socio-political, religious and material relationships embodied in the temple. This is the hope of those who enter into carnival or “street theatre” as Ched Myers calls it. Momentarily the world is turned upside down and participants are invited into a different world.

Mk 11:17 creatively intertwines two biblical texts, Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. It contrasts the “ideal” temple that Jesus’ actions are symbolically enacting and the temple

evoked in pious words that are accompanied by profound injustices in the lives of the people and their leaders. In this verse Jesus’ challenge is to the leaders and to those trading in the temple — all those using this space inappropriately.

This invites the ecological reader into the world opening up in front of the text. It is a world in which contemporary readers are challenged to ask about space and its relationship to economic, socio-cultural and religious activities — where they might intersect and where they must diverge. This is not to suggest a retreat into a dualism of sacred and secular space but rather a much richer exploration of material space (habitat) and its relation to the human and the holy that this text evokes.

As the Markan gospel continues to unfold, readers are drawn into the poignancy of this time in the life of Jesus. And the street theatre or carnival, turning of the world upside down, takes readers to the heart of the experience. We know that Planet Earth and all its in-habitants are, like Jesus, at a poignant moment. One invitation to us, the human community, is to learn the way of carnival, to turn our current world upside down so that the other-than-human might demand our attention and our care. ■

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Photo: Mount of Olives

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