



Extravagant Mercy—A New Story in an Ecological Key by Elaine Wainwright rsm

*This is the Spirit of the order, indeed—the true spirit of Mercy flowing on us—words of Catherine McAuley which capture the paradoxical heart of the ‘call’ to mercy within the context of this year of reflection on Consecrated or Religious Life (Letter 78, February 17, 1838). And they echo the beatitude: *Blessed are the merciful for they shall be mercied* (a more literal translation of Matt 5:7). Both short texts take us to the very core of mercy that emerges from the womb of divinity and is embraced by those in the human community committed to doing and being mercy. Such mercy has characterized almost two centuries of consecrated religious life and more recently partnerships in ministry under that title.*

In the Hebrew Bible, one way in which God is named as merciful is by means of the adjective *raham*:

merciful [*raham*] and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [*hesed*] and faithfulness [*emet*] (Ex 34: 6).

From the root *rh* comes the noun *rehem* which designates the womb, and the adjective *raham*/merciful. The noun *rahamim* can be translated ‘womb compassion/mercy’. This image draws on a corporeal female organ/the womb where life takes form, is nurtured and comes forth in order to express the profound compassion of God [see also Is 30:18; 49:13; Is 54:8, 10; 55:7].

The prophet of *rahamim*/the one doing mercy is to proclaim the womb compassionate one of the covenant not only by name but also by action. As the prophet Isaiah says (61:1):

The spirit of God is upon me,
because God has anointed me;
has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;

This is the justice or the right ordering/righteousness yearned for by the womb compassionate one (see also Is 61:3-4).

In the person of Jesus this divine womb compassion takes on embodiment or materiality—cells and membranes, flesh and blood and all that links this Jesus to Earth and Earth’s life-shaping evolutionary processes. This is captured by the Gospel of Matthew in the phrase, you shall call his name *Emmanu-el*/ God/divinity with us/the Earth/Universe (Matt 1:23) and in the words of John’s Gospel: the W/word became flesh (Jn 1:14).

The three synoptic gospels tell the story of Jesus, the fleshly/earthly one, as that of a prophet of justice and mercy. He is moved with compassion in the face of illness and death in the community (Matt 20:34; Mark 1:41; Luke 7:13), of their hunger (Matt 14:14; 15:32//Mark 6:34; 8:2) and their being 'harassed and helpless' (Matt 9:36). In each of these texts, the verb used is [*splagchnizomai*] meaning to be moved in one's gut, one's entrails. It is a strong and fleshly word like *rahamim* and it seeks to capture the merciful compassion of Jesus expressed in very material ways.

It is this same call to gut-wrenching compassion which Jesus bequeaths to his disciples in the last great parable of Matthew's gospel: I am the hungry who need food; the thirsty who long for drink; I am the stranger seeking hospitality; the naked without clothes; and the sick and imprisoned (Matt 25:31-46)—as you do to these... This is the call to mercy and justice that finds response among those dedicated to Mercy mission around our globe today. In the words of Sandra Schneiders which she used to describe those in consecrated religious life but which can also be said of their partners in ministry: S/he 'wants to be where the cry of the poor meets the ear of God' (*Finding the Treasure*, 141).

With this same listening ear, we are hearing another call, another story near to the ear or the heart of God. It is the story of the Universe that we now know evolved over 13.7-14 billion years with planet Earth and its solar system emerging only in the more recent 4.6-5 billion years and the human community of *homo erectus* only 2 million years ago. The 'book of the genealogy' into which the birthing of Jesus is placed in Matt 1:1 is indeed the 'book of the genealogy of the heavens and earth' (Gen 2:4a) and of the human community male and female (Gen 5:1-2). We are being invited to listen to and to learn the story or stories of the cosmos that cosmologists and biologists are telling and with which biblical scholars, theologians, ethicists and religious and spiritual seekers are engaging. It is a story that is emerging from near to the ear/heart of God.

From this same place we are also hearing the cry of Earth, of the planet with all its intricate webs of life that constitute its evolutionary network. It is being dealt with violently by the human community. Relentless mining and fracking is leaving tracts of arable land desolate. Carbon emissions from human industries and lifestyles are threatening arctic ice and Earth's oceans bringing rising sea levels and devastating hurricanes and storms. Myriads of species and life-forms are being made extinct at a rate unknown previously and not by natural evolutionary processes. This is the cry of a new 'poor', the other-than-human poor. It is also a cry that is intimately connected to those in the human community whose plight Jesus brought to our attention: those who hunger and thirst, lack adequate food, water and shelter and who are marginalized and imprisoned. The urgent call to mercy and justice comes now with not only a social but also an ecological ring. They cannot be separated near to the heart of God.

To follow this new pathway requires both a new way of *seeing* and a new way of *being*. As humans, we have, in recent centuries, made ourselves the centre of the universe leading us to ignore or exploit all that is other-than-human. The ecological imperative calls us to replace ourselves among all that is material as we are—to *see* differently. With new eyes, we can read our world anew, seeing soil and plant, desert and mountain, and all animals

including the human one who has evolved to self-reflective consciousness—all these live in and contribute to the extraordinary web of being. As our eyes and perspectives shift and change, we can learn to read our sacred stories anew. We can see and hear in them the intricate webs of life that we encounter in our world. These webs link place, time and space, plants and all that is the material of the universe with which divinity is engaged—habitat, the human and the holy play anew within our sacred stories of God, of Jesus, of Mercy, of justice. This is indeed to ‘ask the beasts’ and others of life’s beings as the words of Job (12:7-8) and the title of Elizabeth’s Johnson’s recent book (*Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*) invite.

Mercy, however, doesn’t just invite us to *see*, even if it is to see anew, but also to *be*, to act differently. We are being called in this Year of Consecrated/Religious Life to “act and choose in accord with the gospel” (43). And our gospel is pointing us to a new ethic, a new pathway—eco-justice that holds together the social and the ecological. Together we will need to learn anew for our time “the true Spirit of mercy flowing in us”, the way/s of being merciful so that our planet might be ‘mercied’. And if we make that journey together then, in the words of the psalmist paraphrased:

mercy and ecological justice will meet,
the right ordering of all things and peace shall embrace,
ecological justice will spring up from the ground,
and the right ordering of all justice will look down from the sky
[A paraphrase of Ps 85:10].

Questions Relating to Reflection on Mercy and Ecology

1. **Womb Compassion:** What image/s of the God of Compassion colour our spirituality as women/men of Mercy? How do the images of ‘God’s Womb Compassion’/‘Jesus being moved in his entrails’ impact on our ministry of mercy and justice in today’s world, especially the call to ecological justice?
2. **The ‘Story of the Universe’:** What is the story of the universe that informs our life and our spirituality given today’s changing world view/s? What are the sources that are most useful in informing us in this regard? Where and how can we learn from cutting edge scientific insights that impact on our view of our Earth story (you may be able to explore some of these together)?
3. **Telling our Sacred Stories Anew:** How are we being challenged, in light of science/cosmology to tell our sacred stories anew? Where and how is this happening in your context? What can we learn from biblical scholars, theologians and spiritual writers who are undertaking this task [In particular the short articles of Elizabeth Johnson, Kath Rushton and Elaine Wainwright in the list above might assist here as a shared source]
4. **Ecological Justice:** How are you and your community/congregation/institute responding to the call to ecological justice?
[A search of congregational, institutes’ and MIA websites could be helpful here to expand our knowledge of new ecological initiatives, centres etc]? What is our new call to mercy and justice in the face of the urgency of climate change and the widespread destruction of habitats and species essential for life on the planet?

Resources for Reflection on Mercy and Ecology

Edwards, Denis. [Ecology at the Heart of Faith: the Change of Heart that Leads to a New Way of Living on Earth](#). Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006.

----- . "Ecology and Incarnation: Exploring a Christian Ecological Theology." Accessed <http://vimeo.com/32557592>.

Johnson, Elizabeth A. [Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love](#). London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

----- . "An Earthy Theology." *America* 13 April, 2009. Accessed <http://americamagazine.org/issue/693/article/earthy-christology>.

----- . "Ask the Beasts: Spirituality and the Evolving Earth." Accessed <http://frontrow.bc.edu/program/askthebeasts/> [Evelyn Underhill Lecture in Spirituality given at Boston College, 13 July, 2013 – 85 mins].

McLaughlin, Nellie. [Out of Wonder: The Evolving Story of the Universe](#). Dublin: Veritas, 2004.

Rushton, Kathleen. ["God So Loved the World": John 3:16-18—Trinity Sunday 16 June.](#) (2 pps; PDF)

Schneiders, Sandra M. [Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context](#). New York: Paulist, 2000 [See pp. 123-152].

----- . [Buying the Field: Catholic Religious Life in Mission in the World](#). New York: Paulist, 2013. [See pp. 616-628]

Wainwright, Elaine M. "[An Ecological Reading of the Gospel of Mark – Part 1](#)." Available on *Tui Motu* website

There is a wealth of excellent DVD and online resources in relation to the emerging scientific understanding of the universe e.g.:

[Journey of the Universe](#); [Our Planet: The Past, Present and Future of Earth](#); [Planet Earth: The Complete Series](#) together with programmes of [David Attenborough](#).

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