

## Earth Day 2019 Reflection: "The Earth is God's "

Earth Day 2019 falls on Easter Monday when Christians across the planet are celebrating the mystery of redemption brought about by the crucified and resurrected Christ. On this 49<sup>th</sup> Earth Day, the human community is being urged to “protect our species.” My initial response to this Earth Day theme was to wonder why the focus was on “our” species, on *homo sapiens*, the one surviving species of the genus *homo*. It may well be worth focussing on ourselves and our propensity for self-destruction, but should we not rather be focussing on the other-than-human Earth community and on what “our species” has done to the rest of earth’s creatures? This was my question. My musings as well as my question were, of course, based on a false premise. I visited the Earth Day website and discovered that the possessive pronoun “our” was not referring to humans at all. It had reference, rather, to the other-than-human endangered species of our planetary home, the home that the human community now shares with creatures that inhabited this planet long before *homo sapiens* appeared on the scene.

Another question arises for me: Why speak of the other-than-human as “our species”? It might be argued that the close relationship of humans with all the creatures of the earth legitimates the possessive pronoun “our”. All Earth beings are indeed “our” relatives and those from whom humans evolved are our closest relatives. That said, the undeniable interrelationship of humans with other creatures of the earth does not validate any sense of human ownership or proprietorship over the other-than-human. When we use the possessive pronoun of “our” domestic animals, we must never forget that they are only ours in the sense that we have a close relationship with them. They are never truly ours. In this context, we simply cannot use the possessive pronoun “our” in any proprietorial sense. Rather, we are invited to stand in awe at the integrity and the wonderful diversity of all plant and animal life and to eschew anything that would diminish that integrity or diversity.

We are invited to be co-custodians of Earth’s bounty and of Earth’s diverse inhabitants. In other words, we are invited to recognise that the Earth cares for us and that we must care for the Earth and for all its inhabitants. We are also called to acknowledge that “our species”, *homo sapiens*, is largely responsible for the current rapid rate of other-than-human species decline and even extinction. Acknowledging collective and personal culpability might be a first step towards changing our behaviour and working intentionally to arrest Earth’s degradation.

When we turn to our wisdom tradition, we find reminders that “the earth is God's and all that is in it, the world, and those that live in it” (Psalm 24:1). The psalmist declares that “the depths of the earth are in God’s hands, the heights of the mountains are God’s as well. The sea is God’s, for God made it, and the dry land which God’s hands have formed” (Psalm 95:4-5). These were the songs that Israel sang and that both Jews and Christians continue to proclaim in their liturgical gatherings. How then did we come to treat Earth’s creatures and Earth’s bounty as though they were there solely for human consumption and manipulation? Many have struggled to answer this question. The same biblical tradition that proclaims God’s ownership of the land and of its creatures would seem to have legitimated human exploitation of God’s other-than-human Earth community. We must remember that the text is not necessarily innocent and that it is less than helpful to defend those biblical texts that command or sanction domination or the exercise of human power over other species.

There was a time in human history when faithful Christians had no hesitation in accepting as word of God the command that slaves be subject to their masters. With the abolition of slavery came the realisation that we can no longer proclaim such commands as word of God, even if they are part of our biblical heritage. In other words, we accept in our tradition the validity of a principle of selection. We are called to exercise that principle when it comes to certain biblical texts that purport to give our species, *homo sapiens*, control over the other species that inhabit our planetary home. Phyllis Trible reminded us that some stories in the bible about the brutal treatment of women are in fact “texts of terror” (*Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Fortress, 1984). Such stories are to be told only “in memoriam”. They are not to be emulated. They are to serve, rather, as reminders of what must never happen again. Might we not apply this same principle to those biblical texts that threaten to “terrorise” the integrity of the other-than-human created world? Let us read such texts only “in memoriam”. Let us re-member and grieve for the creatures destroyed by human greed, whether mindlessly or intentionally. Let us never again exercise dominion or power “over” any element of God’s creation.

Let us rather tell stories of hope for all the creatures of the planet and emulate these stories. We might begin with the story of British concert pianist, Paul Barton, who plays classical music for the blinded and suffering elephants of Thailand. These beautiful and intelligent animals were used to deforest their own environment and were then abandoned by their exploiters. Barton wants to “apologise” to them for the crimes of “our species” in their regard. The transformation in their lives, from deprivation of sight and all that that implies to playful movement of their bodies in response to the music, is evidence enough that, in some mysterious sense, these elephants participate in the mystery of suffering, death and resurrection that we celebrate this week.

The words of Denis Edwards, priest and theologian, come to mind. Denis’ sudden death on March 5 this year has been a catalyst for many to revisit his scholarly contribution to the field of ecological theology. In *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption and Special Divine Action* (ATF, 2010), he writes: “When Revelation envisions all living creatures ‘in heaven and earth and under the earth and in the sea’ singing praise to the one sitting on the throne and the Lamb who had been slain, it is clear that all these creatures are seen as sharing in some way in the redemption brought about by the crucified and risen Christ” (p. 161). He goes on to suggest that “each animal is known and loved by God, is the dwelling place of the Creator Spirit, participates in redemption in Christ, and abides forever in the living memory of God” (p.165). Denis Edwards has much more to say on this subject, as do other scholars like Elizabeth E. Johnson and Nicola Hoggard Creegan. If Earth Day 2019 is the day that a few more of “our species” turn to the works of these authors and to the wisdom of the Earth Bible Commentary Series, that would be one of many worthwhile outcomes of this global event. Such writings invite me to bring the devastation of Earth into dialogue with the Christian tradition and leave me incapable of indifference to the plight of Earth and of its diminishing species. I expect they will do the same for you. For all of us, those who have access to such works and those who do not, there is always Psalm 24 to remind us that the wondrous works of creation belong to God and not to us: “the earth is God's and all that is in it, the world, and those that live in it”.

Websites: <https://www.earthday.org/campaigns/endangered-species/earthday2019/>;

Music for Elephants <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfZfEkrhX1A> accessed 30/03/2019

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First published in *Mercy eNews*, Issue 815 (17 April 2019). [www.mercyworld.org](http://www.mercyworld.org)