



An Ecological Reading of Matthew's Gospel

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT explains how the opening verses of the Gospel of Matthew situate Jesus in the Earth and cosmological community.

The turning of the liturgical cycle and the turning of the calendar year draws our attention to the Gospel of Matthew which we shall hear, read and ponder during 2017. This column each month will engage with the gospel ecologically providing the opportunity to read our sacred text through the lens of and in dialogue with not just text but also con-text, both ancient and contemporary. The con-text is all that surrounds and is imbued in the text itself. As we read with fresh eyes the materiality of con-text will come alive in our imagination and our very being. It will give new life to the scripture and to us as a community reading our sacred text. In the language of the Matthean gospel, this is where and how God is with us (Mt 1:23).

Clues Within Text

The Gospel's opening verse begins with the book of the genealogy/*biblos geneseōs* of Jesus Christos. The verse vibrates, as it were, with what we call intertexts. They are texts that occur elsewhere in the bible and which are evoked either explicitly or implicitly in a new text. In Mt 1:1 we find the words of Genesis 2:4a, the book of the generations/the *biblos geneseōs* of the heavens and the earth when they were created, evoked in the *geneseōs*, the genesis of the heavens/sky and the earth together with all Earth's constituents, as they echo through the first words of the Matthean gospel. The intertexture with Gen 5:1-2, the *biblos geneseōs* of the human community/the *anthrōpōn* (the human)

male and female, functions to place the human story within the story of Earth and of the heavens/the sky.

It is significant that the con-text for the human community is the Earth community. While the human community has always known this, in recent centuries we have come to think of ourselves as having power over the Earth rather than of living in harmony, in right relationship, with it. This mindset has led us to limit our reading of scripture to see only the relationship between the human and the Holy.

The evocation of both Gen 2:4a and 5:1-2 in the opening phrase of Mt 1:1 challenges this narrow reading. Gen 2:4a evokes the first genealogy of the heavens/skies and the earth. It is only later in that genealogy that the human community appears, placing humanity within the unfolding of the universe and so giving us a cosmic genealogy. The Genesis genealogy is encoded in Matthew's opening phrase of the story of Jesus. It invites us to read the story with a cosmological and ecological lens. It is a new story. Justice, or right relationship, calls us to this reading. And justice is woven through the Matthean gospel.

Tied to Earth and Sky

Justice takes our attention to the maleness dominating the opening verse of the gospel: "Jesus *Christos*, son of David, son of Abraham". Recognising this we turn back to the genealogy of Gen 2:4. Divine creativity characterises the Genesis narrative and this creativity is shared by the human community, male and female, in the image of the Divine (Gen 1:27). However, this community was given dominion over the Earth in Gen 1:28. We need to critique this perspective in the narrative as we have seen dominion borne out destructively in relation to the Earth and to the vulnerable in the human community, many of them women. Such dominion cannot be allowed to permeate our ecological reading of the Matthean text and its intertexts despite the dominant androcentrism of the gospel opening verse and of the entire genealogy. (We read that a male was the father of another male

repeated 39 times, broken only by the naming of five women.)

The inter-con/textuality in Mt 1:1 alerts readers to a range of indigenous cosmologies evoked by the intertext of Gen 2:4a. By way of example, for New Zealand Māori, *whakapapa*/genealogy is a key to their identity and it is conceived cosmically. The poet, Apirana Taylor, captures this:

Whakapapa whakapapa ties you to the land . . . this is your inheritance the sky and earth and all that lies between.

Each generation of Matthew's genealogy (Mt 1:2-16) is "tied" to a habitat and land, the Earth, while also belonging to the genealogy of the heavens/sky.



New Story

The opening word of the gospel — *biblos* — and its rich inter-con/textuality signals a new narrative, a new story of the heavens/sky and the Earth, a new story of Earth held together within the woven tapestry of text, the *biblos*. Before it became known as "book" or "narrative", *biblos* named the bark, the inner bark of the papyrus plant from which sheets of papyrus were made to be used as the carrier of writing and story. The original gospel texts were most likely written on papyrus.

Biblos functions within the web of life of the Earth community. The giving up of the inner bark for writing material evokes the giving up of the life of Jesus *Christos*, the central human character in the narrative.

Jesus, Child of Earth and Sky

The *biblos* *geneseōs* becomes very specific in the second half of the verse and provides the focus of a particular human genealogy — it is of the one who is designated *lēsou Christou*. Jesus' name frames the genealogy (Mt 1:1 and 1:17) and provides a textual link between Mt 1:16 and 1:18. In Mt 1:16, the name Jesus is followed by the phrase "who is called the Messiah (the anointed, the *Christos*)", whereas in Mt 1:17 *Christos* stands alone in designating Jesus. Mt 1:18 parallels Mt 1:1 in that *Christos* follows immediately after the name Jesus. It seems that by the time of the compilation of the Gospel, *Christos*, or anointed one, had become synonymous with the name Jesus.

Another naming of Jesus occurs in Mt 1:23 and can rebound back to the *Christos* designation in Mt 1:1. Jesus is identified metaphorically as *Emmanu-el*, God with us. The gospel is suggesting that God is with "us" — Earth and all Earth's constituents (Mt 1:23). It is not just as a particular geographical, historical, political and economic community but as all who participate in the biotic and abiotic Earth community within the context of a new ecological perspective.

God has been "with us" from the beginning as indicated in the genealogy's opening and unfolding. God is with us now, the contemporary Earth community, in the birth of this particular child Jesus in all his materiality and his con-textuality replete with the web of multiple interrelationships that constitute him. It is into this that the opening verse of Matthew's gospel invites contemporary readers. ■



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An Ecological Reading of Matthew's Gospel

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT provides a fresh approach to understanding the Beatitudes in her interpretation of Matthew 5:1–12.

When I first turned my ecological lens to the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:1–12, I imagined that they would be an almost impossible challenge – we have read them from an exclusively human-centred perspective for so long. How surprised I was to find new wisdom opening up in front of me.

Notice the Time

The text of Mt 5:1–12 opens at the precise moment when Jesus sees the crowd. The gospel writer draws attention to a point in time: it is a particular day which may seem like any other day and any other time. But on this day, crowds are gathering and Jesus goes up the hillside, sits down on the ground and teaches. Our encounters in the gospels with Jesus *Emmanu-el* are always grounded in time, and this invites us to be attentive to the particularity of days and moments.

Notice the Place

As well as alerting us to the specificity of time, the opening verse of Mt 5:1–12 draws particular attention to place: Jesus went up the *hillside*. Place, like time, is something we can overlook in our gospel story. However, the evangelist makes it significant by mentioning it early and up front. There is an interrelationship of time and place – the day, the crowds, Jesus, the hillside and the final words of the opening verse – which grounds what follows: “and he taught them from there” (Mt 5:2). There are no teachings of Jesus which stand apart from time and place.

Blessed Are the Truly Humble

Jesus, the preacher of beatitudes from a place on the mountain, names first as blessed or happy those who are poor in spirit, the truly humble ones, those associated with the humus, the earth. They know the experience of self-emptying as did the God who identifies with humanity (the *Emmanu-el*/the with-us God). Being poor in spirit as an ecological virtue invites identification with the human community and with the more-than-human Earth

community. In this way, God's new vision for Earth and for the universe can be realised. That vision is imaged in first-century language of the *basileia* or empire. It is not of Rome or the human community, however, but of the heavens/of the skies. As contemporary readers, our knowledge of "the skies" allows us to hear the image evoking a new understanding of the universe of which the human community is such a small part.

Mourning Broken Relationships

The second beatitude proclaims blessed those who mourn. The extraordinary discovery in an ecological reading of this beatitude is that in the biblical tradition it is not only the human community which mourns but the land also mourns in response to broken relationships in human and other-than-human communities (see Hos 4:3). In particular, we might hear in this beatitude the plight of those Earth creatures who mourn the loss of companions from a species or habitat as a result of destruction by wanton human power. Who, indeed, brings them comfort?

Attending to Earth as Gift

The meek who will inherit the earth evokes Psalm 37 and especially Ps 37:11 which Mt 5:5 cites directly. In that psalm, those who do good or right are those who wait for God (Ps 37:9); those who are blessed by God (Ps 37:22); the righteous (Ps 37:29); and the one who is exhorted to wait for God and keep God's ways. Each of these phrases could describe the meek whom the psalm says "inherit the earth". This claim echoes through the third beatitude.

For the ecological reader, however, the language of inheriting the earth needs a prophetic critique because the dominant understanding of land in Israel was that it belonged to God and was given to Israel for its rightful use not its ownership or possession. The ecological reader will attend to and engage with land in its materiality and sociality. It is not simply dirt or ground. It is rich with diversity and relationality and it is a gift.

Living in Right Relationships

The thread that links the third and fourth beatitudes is that of "righteousness" or "the righteous". In Ps 37:29, it is the "righteous" rather than the "meek" who inherit the land. In the fourth beatitude, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are called blessed and the righteousness envisaged is the right ordering of all things. For the ecological reader, those who hunger and thirst for this right ordering live in accord with the entire Earth and all its constituents and with divinity. This is the pinnacle of the first four beatitudes and turns readers toward the second group.

There are so many arenas in the Earth community where right order has been broken down and relationships destroyed. Each of the Beatitudes holds out invitations or even imperatives for the new vision. No longer can we hear this right ordering intended just for the human community.

Loving Compassionately

The merciful are those named blessed in the fifth beatitude. They embody mercy; one of the key characteristics of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. There mercy is identified as *rachamim* (womb compassion) and *hesed* (steadfast love). The merciful whom Jesus proclaims honoured in Mt 5:8 can be understood, therefore, as those who are moved corporeally with womb compassion as God is said to be so moved for the ones who suffer. For today's ecological reader, suffering is not confined to the human community. Earth itself and all its constituents suffer the ravages of industrialization, over-farming, dumping of toxic waste, disregard for animals and other devastations. It calls forth the corporeal womb compassion that in its turn can create communities of compassion. It is here that the merciful one is mercied as the beatitude claims.

Openness in Encounters

The honouring of the "pure in heart", who are promised that they will see God, continues to emphasise the corporeality of the ethics of the Beatitudes. It is with the heart and the eyes that see us as an Earth creature in relation to the divine, as well in relation to Earth and all its constituents. This beatitude seems to call for openness: to God, to one's own corporeality and to other Earth beings. It is in these encounters that one sees God as God with-us, the Earth community.

Peacemaking

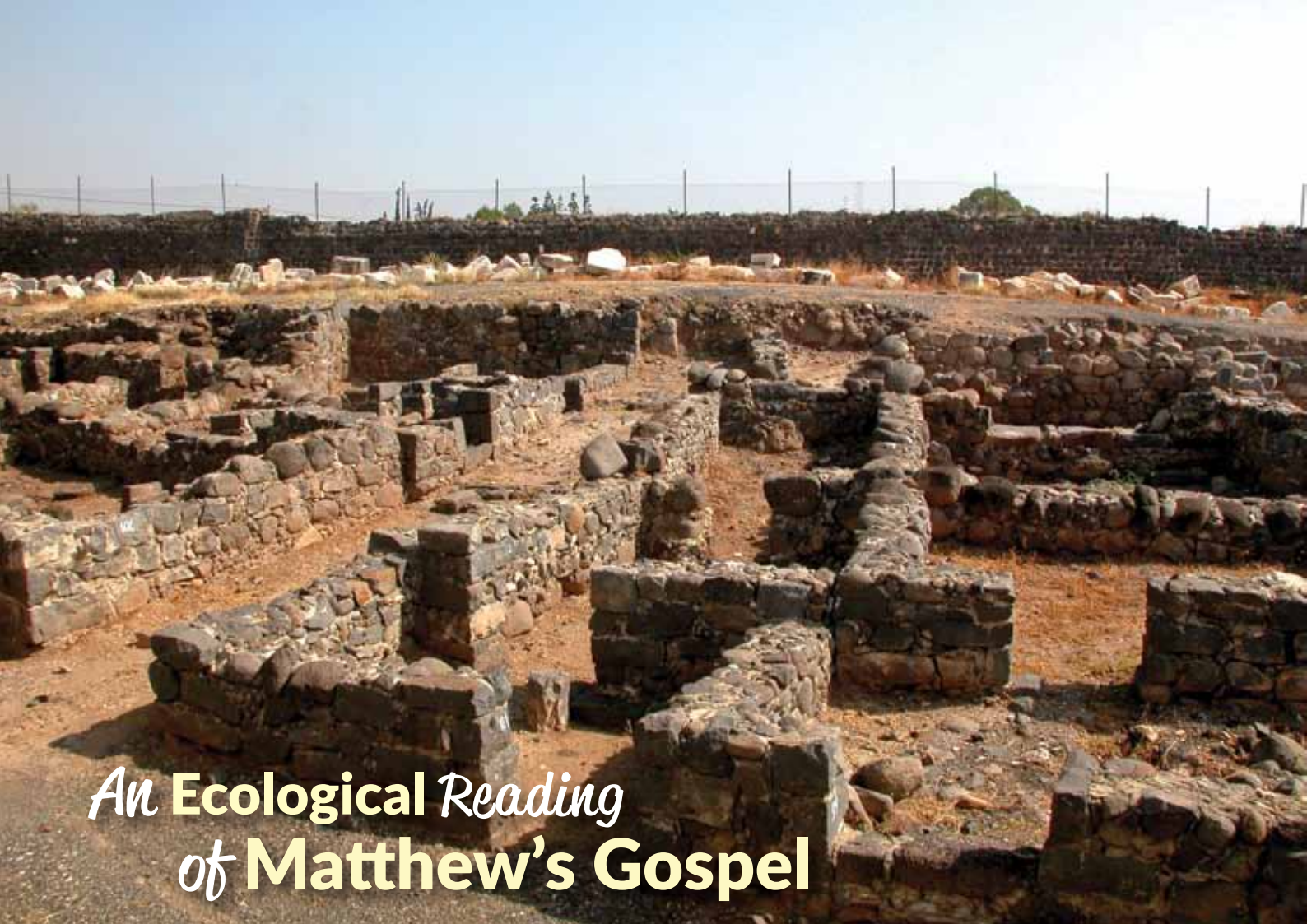
The *shalom* or the peace of God permeates Israel's sacred story but there is just one use of the term "peacemaker" (Proverbs 10:10). The peacemaker *par excellence* in Israel's sacred story is the ideal king of Psalm 72 who brings together *dikaioynē* (righteousness) and peace (Ps 72:3, 7). Jesus proclaims such a one blessed in the final two beatitudes (Mt 5:9,10). The final beatitude then echoes the fourth and adds a recognition that hungering and thirsting and working for right order and righteousness in the entire Earth community can bring persecution.

There are so many arenas in the Earth community where right order has been broken down and relationships destroyed. Each of the Beatitudes gives an invitation or even an imperative for the new vision that frames the Beatitudes (the *basileia* of the skies — Mt 5:3, 10) while right ordering infuses them through Mt 5:6, 10 (the fourth and eighth beatitude). No longer can we hear this right ordering intended just for the human community. Rather it extends into all relationships in the Earth community. It is this that we hear in the words of the prophet Jesus who sits on the earth of the hillside and teaches. ■

Painting: *The Beatitudes Sermon* by James Tissot. © Brooklyn Museum.



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An Ecological Reading of Matthew's Gospel

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT pays particular attention to the interaction with the environment of Peter's house and his mother-in-law's place in it in her reading of Matthew 8:14-15.

8:14 When Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever; ¹⁵ he touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve him. NRSV

The text I have chosen for an ecological reading this month is just two verses, Matthew 8:14-15. It is usually named the healing of Peter's mother-in-law and it belongs among a collection of healing stories in Mt 8-9, similar to that of Jesus' teachings in Mt 5-7. These chapters and collections of stories are framed by Mt 4:23 and Mt 9:35: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the *basileia*/kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people." Teaching and healing

constitute the Galilean ministry of Jesus and both are rich in potential for ecological readings.

Healing Stories in Matthew

Before concentrating on the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, we can consider gospel healing from an ecological perspective. The healing stories invite readers into the profound materiality at play in the text — the materiality of bodies broken, bodies touched, bodies healed — and the stories take place in geographical, cultural and social habitats.

Another key aspect is how the

senses function — seeing, hearing, touching — each giving access to the material. All of these elements interact in the text and invite our ecological engagement.

The Place and Houses

The story in Mt 8:14-15 locates Jesus in a very specific place. The narrative says he enters a house — Peter's house. Materially, the text evokes Capernaum's 1st-century basalt houses with their roofing constructed of branches and clay. These houses were the scene of the lives and economic activities of the families who lived in them. (In Mt 4:13 we read that Jesus makes his home in that town.)

The families' food production and other industries were carried out in either the rooms of the house

or in the courtyard. Hence, the ecological texture of the opening words of the text is constituted by a complex mix of basalt and branches, food, clothing, bedding and perhaps the multiple resources associated with the fishing industry for which Capernaum was famous.

Jesus Sees the Woman

Jesus enters Peter's house and sees Peter's mother-in-law. She is introduced in language that is descriptive of the violence of the illness on her human body — she is "cast down"/*beblēmenēn* as well as being feverish. That Jesus sees the woman functions as the initial stage in the healing process. Ecological readers will note that it is *seeing* which leads to healing. It is a seeing which recognises the dis-ease, the brokenness, the mal-functioning of bodies within socio-cultural and ecological systems, all of which are in need of healing.

Jesus Touches the Woman

Then with a shift in sensory activity *seeing* gives rise to *touching*. The text says that Jesus touches her hand, making explicit what is implicit in touch, namely that touching and being touched are reciprocal in the one act. Touch is a call and a response to a call. Jesus responds to the call from the tormented body of the woman and his touching calls for healing from within her.

I think that the intimacy of touch and being touched in the Matthean Gospel embodies a way in which God is with the Earth community as we saw in Mt 1:23. God is near in the intimacy of touch, in the meeting of flesh, in the restoring of material/fleshly brokenness. Touch is a key characteristic in the more-than-human world and its healing, a world which is home to multiple species and life-forms.

The final two phrases of our narrative describe the woman's bodily change. She was being raised up and she was doing *diakonia*. Healing is manifest in material or corporeal changes which are then interpreted to make meaning within the cultural sphere.

Not Just Healing — A Call

Another aspect Mt 8:14–15 is not always recognised but has significant ecological implications. We have just read this text as a healing narrative within the context of the healing collection of the gospel (Mt 8-9) and noted the importance of seeing and touching.

It is essential that we don't dismiss the woman's doing as the ordinary good deeds of a woman in the household. The significance of diakonia in Matthew's Gospel comes from Mt 20:28 when Jesus appropriates it to his own ministry — "he came not to be served but to serve".

However, when the form or structure of Mt 8:14–15 is compared with other healing narratives, we find a discrepancy in form. It becomes clear in the statement that Jesus *sees* the woman and takes the initiative to heal. Generally in healing narratives, the person requests healing or supplicants ask on their behalf. This shows that Mt 8:14–15 is much closer to the structure of a call story (see Mt 9:9) than a healing story (see Mt 8:2–4). Actually, it is exactly parallel to Mat 9:9 when Jesus calls Matthew, except for the phrase "the fever left her". This is the only call story of a woman to discipleship of Jesus that has been preserved in the New Testament.

Attending to Nuances of Story

It is important to recognise this call when reading ecologically as it makes us attentive to the manifestations of oppression and injustice in both the human and other-than-human worlds and their interrelationships. Women's participation in the Matthean Gospel story is minimal compared to the centrality of male characters and even

with the other-than-human actants in the narrative.

However, my study indicates that there is a significant storyline of female characters in the text, beginning with the women in the genealogy (Mt 1:3, 5, 6, 16) and ending with the women commissioned to proclaim the resurrection (Mt 28:1-10). Therefore, it's not surprising that the Matthean community retained the story of a woman called to discipleship as seen in Mt 8:14-15.

On the other hand, it is also not surprising that this radical story might have morphed into a more acceptable one — the healing of a woman rather than the woman's call to discipleship. The attentive ecological reader will note this gendering of a text as much as to the materiality encoded within that text and their interrelationships.

Woman Called to Ministry

In the last phrase of Mt 8:15 the woman is said to be doing *diakonia* or *diakonia-ing*. It is essential that we don't dismiss the woman's *doing* as the ordinary good deeds of a woman in the household. Peter's mother-in-law is doing what the women did who followed Jesus to Jerusalem and right to the foot of the cross (Mt 27:55). Like them, she ministers to Jesus. The significance of *diakonia* in Matthew's Gospel comes from Mt 20:28 when Jesus appropriates it to his own ministry — "he came not to be served but to serve".

I hope this reading of the short story, Mt 8:14–15, will encourage you to explore the healing stories of Mt 8–9 further attending to the telling details of the relationships of the material, the habitats and all the characters in the stories. This is a challenging but focused invitation. ■

Photograph: *Basalt houses, Capernaum*
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An Ecological Reading of Matthew's Gospel

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT shows how the central proclamation of Matthew's Gospel 10:1, 5-13 invites us into a new relationship with the heavens and Earth.

Matt. 10:1 Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. . . . 5 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the

Samaritans, 6 but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' 8 Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment . . .

Before beginning an ecological reading of the text chosen each month this year, I have placed it within the well-constructed story of Matthew's Gospel. The February text (Mt 1:1) belonged within the Infancy Narrative (Mt 1-2) or Prologue (Mt 1-4). The March text, the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount is in the first block of gathered teaching (Mt 5-7). The April text, the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, is in the collection of healing narratives (Mt 8-9). This month's reading opens the second block of teachings in the unfolding gospel, the Mission Discourse (Mt 10). In it we encounter the instructions

Jesus gives to those who will participate with him in his ministry.

The opening verse of the Mission Discourse (*Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness*) reminds us of the collection of healings in Mt 8-9. In the April article, I said that the healings "invite readers into the profound materiality that plays in the text — the materiality of bodies broken, bodies touched, bodies healed — and this in named habitats that are geographical, cultural and social." And as Jesus healed, so too will his disciples whom he authorises (Mt 10:8). They too will touch bodies and will experience themselves likewise touched as they heal.

However, the ecological reader will notice that the opening verse (Mt 10:1) provides no context for the

discourse and will need to refer back to Mt 9:35. There the context is the unfolding ministry of Jesus who has been going around "the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness." The synagogues visited are the context for healing and it is bodies in all their corporeality that cry out for healing.

Context of Compassion

The poignancy and urgency of Jesus' recognition of the need for healing among the people is captured in the phrase in Mt 9:36: he had compassion for them. The Greek verb used, *splangnizomai*, means "to be moved in the depths of one's being, one's gut, one's entrails". It is a powerful expression which captures the urgency of the need for transformation.

Sallie McFague raises the question

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as to whether this compassion of Jesus was extended beyond the human world to place and the other-than-human. She speculates in moving language — is it seeing with the loving rather than the arrogant eye, the eye of the ecological self?

Jesus sees with a loving eye that the people are “harassed and helpless” (Mt 9:36). Their plight draws forth a material metaphor from the narrator: they are like sheep without a shepherd. And it prompts yet another metaphor from Jesus: the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few (Mt 9:37). This is the context then for Jesus’ co-missioning of those who will assist him in the preaching, teaching and healing ministry.

Instructions for Mission

Jesus instructs the labourers first in relation to place (Mt 10:6). As the Matthean story unfolds to this point, Jesus’ co-missioners are not to go anywhere among the Gentiles nor to any Samaritan town. Rather they are to go only “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

The mission Jesus shares with his followers is limited at this point. He uses an other-than-human character as symbol of the plight of those in need — that of lost sheep. It is an experience that unites the human and other-than-human in the context of first-century Galilean agriculture. It also resonates intertextually with Ez 34:6 and Jer 50:6. Together these enable the ecological reader to be caught up in the embodied “intertwining” of sheep and people both knowing the experience of “lostness”.

At the heart of Jesus’ co-mission of the named disciples is the imperative: “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near’” (Mt 10:7). This message had been preached by John the Baptist (Mt 3:2) and Jesus (Mt 4:17). It is couched in language that holds the human and the other-than-human in creative tension. The Matthean phraseology, *hē basileia tōn ouranōn*/the kingdom of the heavens or sky, is unique in the New Testament and intertextually. It brings together the material and spatial

term, the *ouranōn*/the heavens or sky with *hē basileia*, the socio-political designator evoking power or empire.

Contemporary readers understand the *ouranōn*/the heavens or sky, as the night sky filled with stars, planets and galaxies, what we know now of the universe in all its complexities and beauty [and as seen in the recent programme, *Stargazing Live* with Brian Cox and Julia Zemiro on ABC television]. Even the first-century Graeco-Roman cosmology envisaged the earth surrounded by concentric planetary spheres.

At the heart of Jesus’ co-mission of the named disciples is the imperative: “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near’” (Mt 10:7).

The key Matthean proclamation given to both John and Jesus links the image of the heavens or sky with the *basileia*, the empire, the material, social and politico-cultural entity that constituted Rome. The people of first-century Galilee, where the disciples were being commissioned to preach, were oppressed by this empire in almost every aspect of their lives.

Power of a New Image

What did it mean for Jesus to infuse the multiple aspects of the oppressive empire with the image of the *ouranōn*, the other-than-human heavens? It offered the oppressed people of Galilee the potential for a new imagination at the time of the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. They were being invited to imagine anew, to bring together images, metaphors and experiences that would enable them to dream of and also to enact an alternative to the *basileia* of Rome.

Similarly today, we are invited to allow the imagery of this central proclamation of Matthew’s Gospel to evoke new ways of listening. We are called to be attentive to our *ouranōn*, our heavens (and our Earth). The heavens cannot be just metaphors functioning in a human world. We must befriend, engage with, care for and love the heavens, the Earth and all the materiality that constitutes them in the new universe that is emerging and to which this gospel calls us. We need to be attentive also to the *basileia* of the central Matthean proclamation and look to the social and politico-cultural relationships that interweave with the material in this new vision.

May this central proclamation of the Matthean Gospel — the *basileia* of the heavens is near — propel us to care for the heavens and the Earth. ■

Key Programmes Roles

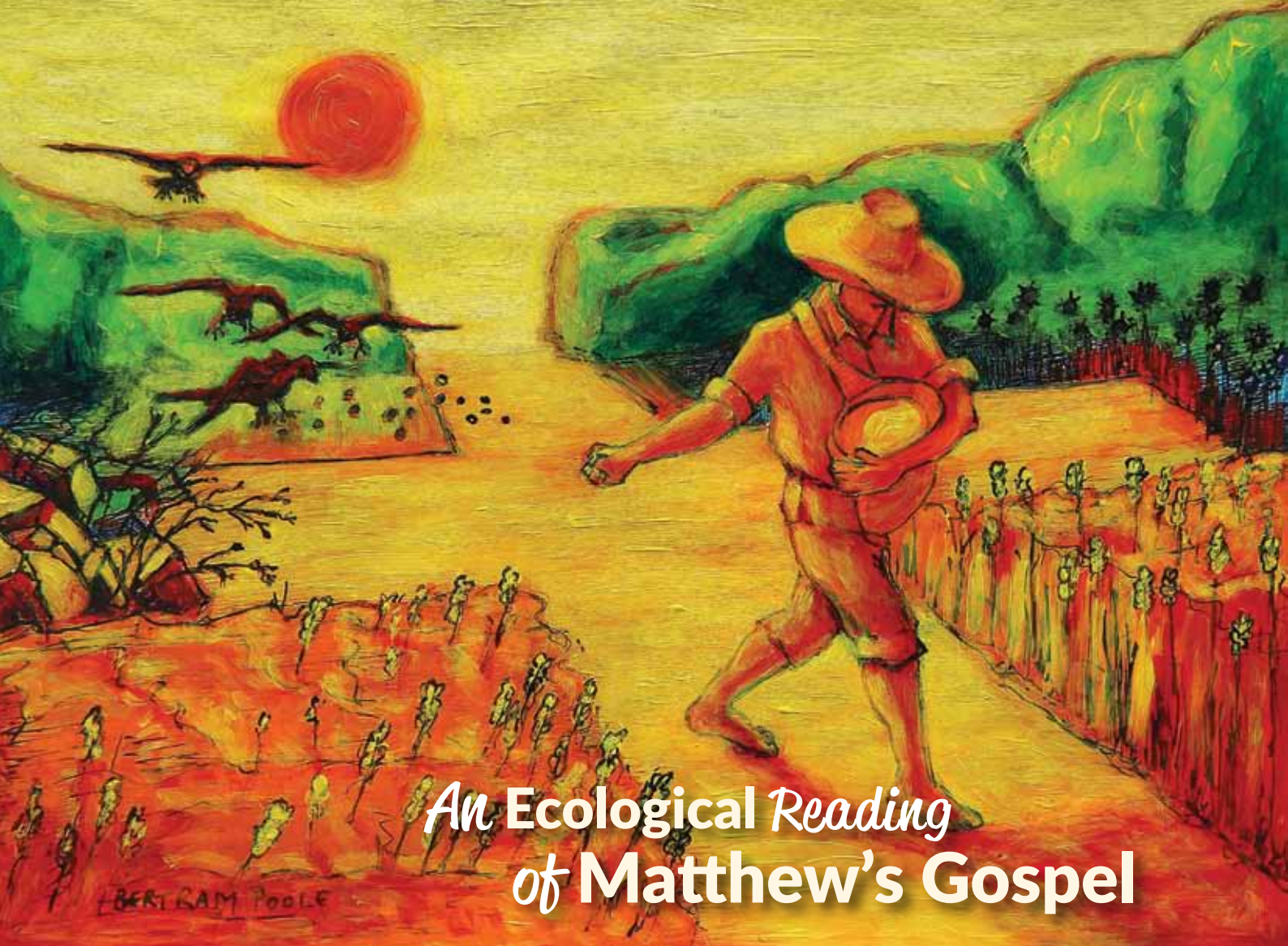


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An Ecological Reading of Matthew's Gospel

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT takes a close look at the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:1-9 and points to aspects which provide a fuller understanding of our relationships in creation.

Matthew 13:1-9 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower

went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched;

and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 Let anyone with ears listen!"

As I began this month's ecological reading of Matthew 13:1-9, I found myself looking back over the texts from the Gospel of Matthew we have read already this year. In the May issue (*TM* May 2017) I placed these texts within the unfolding structure of the gospel. Now, I find myself thinking about the different types of text that we have read. Last month (*TM* May) the text was a

commissioning of 12 male disciples by Jesus, the preacher, teacher and healer and we heard words such as "Go nowhere . . . but go . . . as you go . . . cure, raise, cleanse, cast out" (Mt 10:5-8). In April (*TM* April 2017) we read two verses (Mt 8:14-15) telling of the healing/calling of a woman. They invited us to be attentive to bodies, to their materiality and the ways this materiality is evoked in the story. We

also saw how the senses, especially seeing and touching, functioned in healing. Our ecological reading of the Beatitudes in March (*TM* March 2017) brought new questions to a familiar text and new insights emerged. We found this too in February (*TM* February 2017) when we focused on the opening verse of Matthew's gospel and encountered the rich intertextuality (that is, its echoing of other texts, in this instance

Gen 2:4). Reading ecologically uncovers the richness of the gospel text in new and inviting ways.

Context for Hearing the Parable

In our reading this month we have a different type of text; a parable. However, before we encounter the parable, the gospel narrator provides a context (Mt 13:1-2), telling us the time (“that same day”) and the place (out of the house and beside the sea). Noticing the time and place helps us to read with Earth and its interrelationships. Verse 2 tells us the relationships are complex as human crowds gather about Jesus, he gets into a boat, he sits down in the boat, and the crowds stand on the beach.

The boat and beach are contexts, or the grounding, for the teaching and the hearing of teaching that constitute this section of the Matthean narrative. Indeed, in relation to hearing, this small section concludes with the words of verse 9: “Let anyone with ears listen!” This invites us to learn a new way of hearing.

The first word of Jesus from his place in the boat to the crowds gathered around him on the beach, is the attention claimer *idou* – which can be translated as “look”, “see”, or “listen!” We cannot hear parables without being attentive. However, an ecological reading entails a new, different type of attentiveness, a new seeing and a new hearing. In it we will learn to understand the *basileia/kin(g)* dom of the skies through our senses, through learning from Earth and all its interrelationships. Understanding the *basileia* is the core message of the Matthean Jesus’ preaching, and the beginning of the parables in Mt 13:24; 31; 33; 44; 45; 47.

Setting of the Parable

The first words of the parable describe a very familiar scene to listeners: “A sower went out to sow”. At the layer of possible first-century meaning-making, the sower might be a slave or tenant farmer on one of the large Herodian or Roman estates, or might be working on their small plot. Whatever the context, the sower belonged to

It is nothing complex or extraordinary. There is no breaking of expectations or turning the world upside down. The hearer of the parable is simply called to listen to the process of seed being planted and growing, involving the human and other-than-human in right relationships.

society in a variety of ways and knew the seasonal rhythms for planting and harvesting. Listeners would immediately recognise the context of the parable just as contemporary readers with an ecological consciousness appreciate the rhythm of agriculture or gardening.

Appreciating the Sowing Process

As the parable unfolds, readers/listeners sense that the seed is being scattered (a familiar method in first-century Galilee). The parable then draws readers, both first- and 21st-century, into the ecosystem or ecocycle of sower and seed. Birds are fed by taking up the seeds on the pathway. Weeds take up their groundspace, leaving in some places insufficient space for the sower’s seed. The sun, the wind and the rain – elements that are not named in the parable – enable the seed to grow. Some plants will wither under the sun if their roots are not deep enough while others will be choked out by other plants. The seed that falls on the ground prepared for it bears fruit abundantly.

There is a complex agricultural process at work which the sower understands. And Jesus calls his audience to listen to the process. And it is to this process that contemporary ecological readers are called to listen. It is nothing complex or extraordinary. There is no breaking of expectations or turning the world upside down. The hearer of the parable is simply called to listen to the process of seed being planted and growing, involving the human and other-than-human in right relationships.

The parable reaches a climax in verse 8 when the seed falls on the good soil that had been prepared for it. Yields vary from 30-, 60- or even 100-fold per plant.

Often scholars and preachers speak of these as extraordinary yields but it may not have been the case. Varro, an ancient writer on agriculture, describes yields of “tenfold in one district, 15 in another, even a 100 to one near Gadara in Syria”. Also, we have a first-century coin of Agrippa 1 (Herodian king) showing three ears of grain springing from one stalk to symbolise the fertility made possible in and by Herod and his participation in the empire. There are two sources of abundance vying within this final verse.



Hearing the Parable Today

The call to “listen” at the end of the parable and in verse 18 to “hear then the parable of the sower” invites readers to attend to and learn from Earth’s processes. This is what it means to hear the parable. We know Earth’s processes are material and that social and socio-economic realities interweave with them as well.

These two forces swirl through the final verse of the parable of the sower and listening takes on a further dimension calling the ecological reader to discernment: Is the source of life for Earth and us, or the Empire? We might ask how we might evaluate each.

I think Stephanie Nelson, in her study of the agrarian poems of the Greek poet, Virgil, captures what may have been evoked by the parable of the sower: “because farming is inescapably a part of human life . . . it may provide a clue to what is most basically human, and so a clue to our place within the cosmos.” Listen! Hear! ■

Painting: *Christian Art Parable of the Sower* by T Bertram Poole © <https://bertrampoole.com> and www.ChristianArtNow.BlogSpot.Com



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In TM June 2015, we read the Markan story of a woman named according to her region, Syro-Phoenicia. This woman sought healing for her daughter who was described as “demon possessed” (TM Issue 194, June 2015: 20-21). Now we will read the parallel story in the Gospel of Matthew 15:21-28. We will find that the story has been developed significantly as it was told and re-told in the Matthean context.

Region of Tyre and Sidon

The first words of Matthew’s story draw the reader into its groundedness in time and place, something we’ve come to expect in our ecological reading. The opening reference is vague and time and place merge: Jesus left “that place” (Mt 15:21). We need to go back in the text to discover “that place” was Gennesareth (Mt 14:34) where Jesus carried out his ministry of healing (Mt 14:35-36). However, the text quickly draws us towards a new destination, the region of Tyre and Sidon (Mt 15:21) where Jesus initially refuses to heal.

The reference to the “region” of these two major cities, Tyre and Sidon, along the western seaboard from Galilee, evokes not only materiality but also the tense socio-economic and political interrelationships between the regions.

For instance, one of Tyre’s staple and wealth-producing industries was the production of the precious purple dye. But, as an island city it needed its own hinterland as well that of its most immediate neighbour, Galilee, to supply its inhabitants with food and bread. In Acts 12:20 we find evidence of Tyre’s dependence on Galilee and the conflict it generated. So, complex and tense material, social and political relationships underlie the brief reference in the opening verse of this text of Jesus going *toward*, rather than *into* the region of Tyre and Sidon.

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An Ecological Reading of Matthew’s Gospel

Matthew 15: 21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting: “Have mercy on me, *Kyrios*, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” 23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying: “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” 24 He answered: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying: “*Kyrios*, help me.” 26 He answered: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” 27 She said: “Yes, *Kyrios*, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” 28 Then Jesus answered her: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Painting: *The Canaanite Woman* by Limbourg Brothers [Wikiart]

The Canaanite Woman

The ecological reader will be alert to the beginning words of the next verse, *kai idou*/pay attention or look (Mt 15:22). They draw our attention to a woman, designated as Canaanite, who was coming out of this region, rife with ethnic and politico-economic tensions.

The name “Canaanite” has puzzled scholars as it seems more symbolic than descriptive, especially when we remember that in the Markan Gospel she is called “Greek, Syro-Phoenician by birth” (Mk 7:26). Her “Canaanite” title in Matthew evokes the ancient inhabitants of the Promised Land who were stripped of access by the Hebrews coming in from the desert. It constructs this woman similarly as being denied access to Israel’s/Galilee’s resources — as will be seen as the story unfolds.

Plea for Healing

The woman seeks healing for her daughter whose body has been possessed by a force or power that she names as demonic (Mt 15:22). We are not told how this possession manifests in the daughter’s body. This can be obscured by the dominating verbal interchange between the woman (who is called Justa in later tradition), and Jesus.

However, the demon-possessed body of the daughter remains close to the surface of the text. As ecological readers we will notice, the corporeality imbedded in the woman’s desire and the supplication for healing.

In Mt 15:24 we encounter the materiality of the other-than-human in the text when Jesus claims that he was sent only to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel”. This phrase occurs only twice in other parts of Scripture, in Psalm 119:176 and Jeremiah 50:6. It speaks of sheep, the most common other-than-human creatures in the agricultural life of the Jewish nation. It is the materiality, the corporeality of the straying sheep that Jesus calls upon to contrast his mission to the lost with the dynastic implications of the title “son of David” given him by the Canaanite woman.

The reference to the lost sheep

could be seen or read simply as a literary cipher, but Donna Haraway provides insights into ways in which “the biological and literary or artistic come together with all of the force of lived reality”. This is an area that invites further exploration by the ecological reader of biblical texts.

It was Justa’s refusal to accept rejection by Jesus, the Galilean healer, that enabled healing to happen.

Embodying Her Plea

Justa continues her agency (Mt 15:25), re-addressing her plea to Jesus. This time, she does not use a title for Jesus. She appeals simply: “Help me.” She uses her body to strengthen her appeal by kneeling before Jesus, as did the leper and the ruler’s daughter earlier in the Gospel (Mt 8:2; 9:18). She is embodying pleas for healing. Justa uses the language of her body to speak her desperate need.

Jesus’ response — “It is not *kalon* (good or right) to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” — continues to intertwine the metaphorical and the material. Or, as in Haraway’s words, the “biological and the literary or artistic” come together and the text moves between them.

Sharing Reversed and Extended

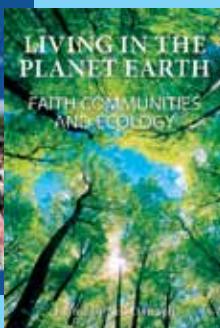
Jesus draws “the dogs” into the text to evoke those who ought not share the bread. Justa, however, reverses the function of the metaphor and does even more. Like Haraway, she evokes the “lived reality” of those dogs that found a place beneath the table. That reality was found recorded on a first-century stone of epigraphical remains.

Justa’s reversal of Jesus’ metaphoric use of bread and dogs functions in the text to reverse his response to her desperate plea for her daughter. First, Jesus affirms the faith that enabled Justa to see the possibility of reversal and to bring it to speech: “Even the dogs can eat the crumbs.” And what she desires for her daughter that is also brought about — her daughter is healed instantly and her body is restored. It was Justa’s refusal to accept rejection by Jesus, the Galilean healer within the web of borders and boundaries, that enabled healing to happen.

Reading Scripture Ecologically

To read biblical texts ecologically is to be attentive to the material, the metaphorical, the socio-political, the economic, the human, the holy and other forces that characterise the text and the world it encodes. It is to examine each of these forces in its integrity and then to trace the interrelationships between them. Once again it is to be caught up in habitat, the human, and the holy. ■

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An Ecological Reading of Matthew's Gospel

Matthew 16:13-20 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Human One is?"¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say

that I am?"¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the

gates of Hades will not prevail against it.¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

As readers, we come to the Gospel text and read it, paying attention to the human and the holy and their interrelationship. But as ecological readers, we bring a new lens. As well as attending to the holy and the human we also take note of the *habitat*. Habitat is the rich interrelationship of the other-than-human and the human as these are woven together in the gospel story. As we read habitat (which includes the human) and the holy in the gospel text, we'll find we become more attentive to them in our world. We're then caught up in the spiralling process of meaning-making. This attentiveness is essential for the ecological conversion to which Pope Francis is calling us. And his call, in its turn, echoes that of John the Baptist and Jesus in Matthew's gospel: "Repent" (Mt 3:2; 4:17) — change your way of seeing, your way of being in this world.

Habitat Holds a Key

This article focuses on Matthew 16:13-16 and like so many of the discrete segments of the Gospel narrative, begins with a reference

to time and to place, grounding the Gospel in habitat. The participle "coming" in Mt 16:13 locates the story in the present time of the gospel narrative and also directs the reader's gaze to a particular place — Caesarea Philippi. The attentive ecological reader will notice that Jesus does not go into the Roman city of Caesarea Philippi but only into the region.

The city was symbolic of the Roman Empire and had an array of religious traditions with temples to Pan, Zeus and Augustus to name but three. It symbolised the *basileia*/empire of Rome and its structures of power against which Jesus was preaching an alternative: a *basileia*/an empire of the heavens or of the skies (See Mt 3:2; 4:17: "Repent for the *basileia* of the heavens/skies is near at hand"). This *basileia* was to be a new community in which human and material resources were to be shared and people were to live in right relationship with those resources, with one another and with God.

Jesus' foray into the "region" rather than the city of Caesarea Philippi would have brought him and his disciples into the area from which the Jordan River rose. It was and is a place of springs bubbling up with fresh life-giving and life-sustaining water, a very different place from the built-up environment of the city of Caesarea Philippi. It is a place where habitat, human

and holy play intimately with one another and provide an opening for Jesus' conversation with those accompanying him on his journey of preaching, teaching and healing (Mt 4:23; 9:35).

The Questions

At the level of the narrative, Jesus' questioning of his disciples is poignant in light of all the time he has spent with them and the crowds. They have accompanied or encountered him preaching, teaching and healing — but now, Jesus steps back from that activity momentarily, and begins an intimate conversation with those named disciples.

He asks them: "Who do the *anthrōpoi*/the human ones say the Son of Humanity/the Human One/*uion tou anthrōpou* is? Who is this who has entered into the Earth community as *anthrōpos*/human one among all Earth's beings?"⁸

The disciples, who have been with Jesus throughout his ministry and have heard the crowd's claims, answer: "He is a prophet" and some even identify him with John the Baptist, Elijah or Jeremiah. And they are right, Jesus has shown himself to be in the line of Israel's prophets, critiquing what is not of God, not of the *basileia* of the heavens and calling for a *metanoia*, a change in their way of being in the Earth community.

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The Jordan River

Continuing this intimate exchange, Jesus then asks his close followers how they name him; he who is human one and prophet. Peter responds on their behalf: “You are the *Messiah*/the anointed one, the one who reveals to us the living God.

Peter’s proclamation is an affirmation of who Jesus is in relation to God and the entire Earth community. He has been acclaimed by God following his baptism, his going down into the waters of creation, the waters of planet Earth and its becoming: “This is the one in whom I am revealed, the beloved in whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17). Jesus has also been affirmed by the gospel narrator in Mt 1:23 as the one who is *Emmanuel*/God with us. We have read these affirmations in terms of the human and the holy. Our invitation now is to read and hear Peter’s words echoing from a profound interrelationship of habitat (including the human) and the holy, to open the text in new ways.

Opening New Insights

Our reading from the perspective that links God, God’s anointed one, and the Earth community in a right ordering, is not confined to contemporary meaning-making and ecological reading. We read in Psalm 72 the psalmist praying for the justice and the right ordering that will characterise the era of God’s anointed, in language and images that could be those of contemporary prophets and psalmists of ecological justice. By way of example:

*May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.
May he [the Messiah] defend the cause of the poor of
the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor . . .
May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth.
In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is no more . . .
For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.
From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight (Ps 72:3–14).*

This is the righteousness, the right ordering that Jesus preaches and enacts in the Matthean Gospel. Jesus’

baptism by John “fulfills all righteousness” (Mt 3:15) which is a key characteristic of the *basileia* that he preaches, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33). It is all of this and more that is caught up in Peter’s affirmation: “You are the *Messiah*/anointed one, the one born of the living God.”

Hearing the Questions Today

We could argue that it is in the very interaction of the human community around Jesus (his disciples) in the habitat in and through which they have journeyed (the place of springs of living water) that Peter has come to his recognition of Jesus’ unique and intimate relationship with divinity.

It is in such places and among such people today that we will come to a new recognition of Jesus for our time, a time of profound ecological crises.

We are invited to answer the question: Who do we say that Jesus is and what will this ask of us? ■



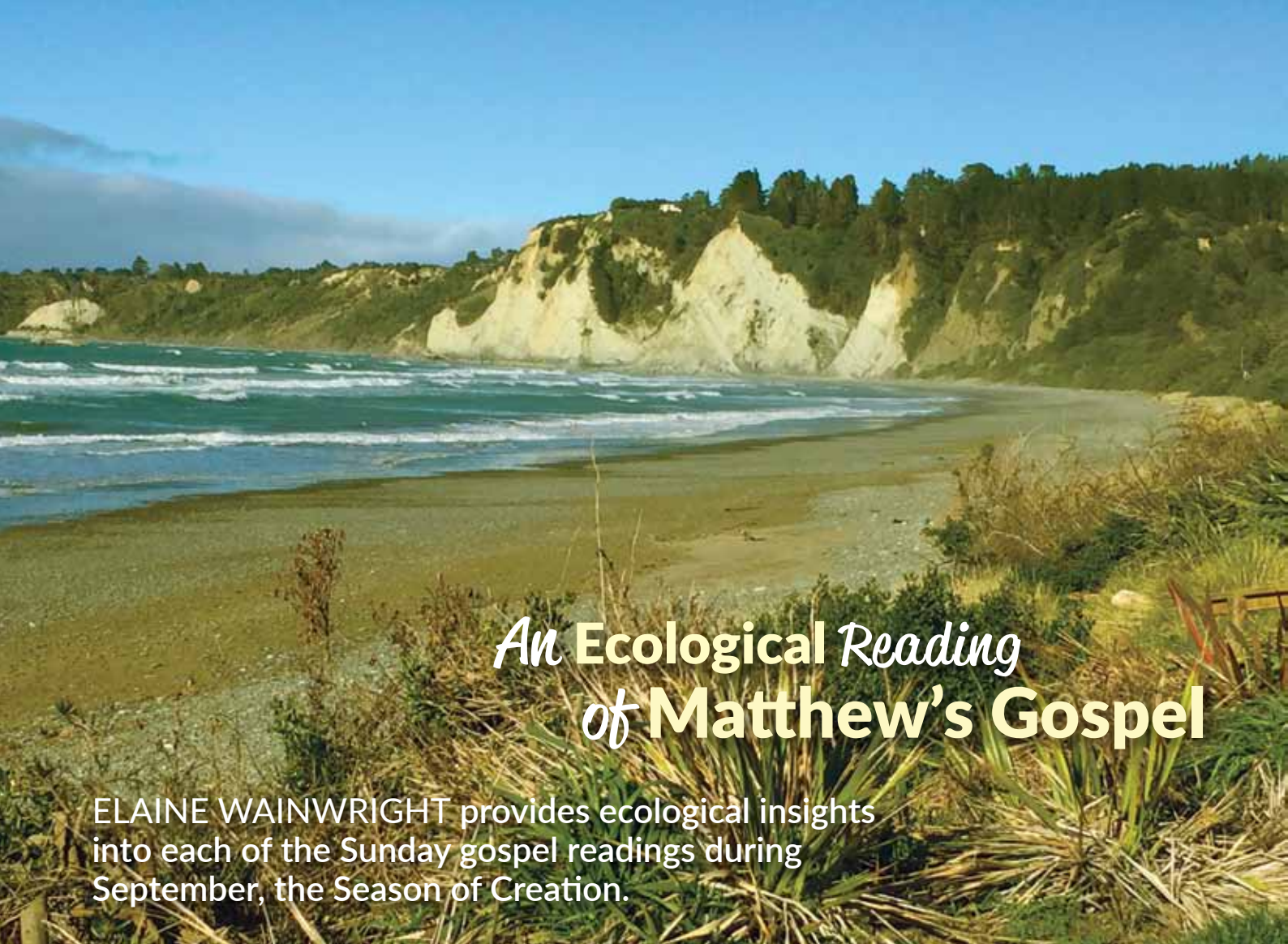
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An Ecological Reading of Matthew's Gospel

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT provides ecological insights into each of the Sunday gospel readings during September, the Season of Creation.

September has been designated by many Churches and Christian traditions as the Season of Creation in the liturgical year. In 1989 Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of the world Orthodox Christian community, proclaimed 1 September as the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation and many other Christian Churches have joined in this tradition. Pope Francis officially recognised 1 September as the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation within the Catholic Church in 2015 and in 2016 he invited Catholics to join in the celebration of the liturgical Season of Creation beginning on 1 September and ending on 4 October (Feast of St Francis of Assisi).

In this article I will explore the gospel readings for the four Sundays of the Season of Creation (3, 10, 17 and 24 September). They are all from Matthew's Gospel and my points will necessarily be brief. This Season of Creation is an opportune time to bring our growing ecological consciousness to all our scriptural readings as well as our liturgy as a whole.

3 Sept – Matthew 16:21-27

In the Matthean story of Jesus the verses Mt 16: 21–27 follow after the Caesarea Philippi incident that we read in *TM* August 2017. As we noted, the location “was/is a place where habitat, human and holy play intimately with one another and provide an opening for Jesus to converse with those accompanying him on his journey of preaching, teaching and healing” (Mt 4:23; 9:35). That conversation turns in Mt 16:21ff. It marks a new time: the moment from which Jesus turns his

attention to Jerusalem. That city, in its turn, becomes a new spatial element in the unfolding narrative. Time and space, those key elements in an ecological reading, continually weave through the Gospel.

The ecological reader will recognise the cycle of life-death-life that Jesus sees ahead of him. Peter, on the other hand, rebukes Jesus for his acceptance of this process and thereby draws one of the strongest rebukes we hear from Jesus: “Get behind me, Satan.” This exchange invites and even challenges us to attend profoundly to all life's processes in which we are embedded. It also sounds as a rebuke to us, the human community, when we seek to set ourselves apart from such processes.

10 Sept – Matthew 18:15-20

Matthew 18 is often designated the “Community Discourse”. This is important to note as community for ecological readers includes

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humans and more-than-human. Mt 18:15-20 invites readers into a process of reconciliation necessary when there is a breakdown in relationships in the emerging gospel communities. We usually understand and read these relationships very explicitly as within the human community with the speaker being a member of that community. However, a way of reading this text ecologically could be to give voice imaginatively to the other-than-human who is offended against. This can expand our consciousness.

And so we might begin: "If your brother or sister in the human community sins against you, an other-than-human one (water, animal, soil...), go and point out the fault when you are alone. If the human one listens to you, you have regained a brother or sister. But if you are not listened to take one or two others from the other-than-human community with you so that every word may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If the offending human refuses to listen to these witnesses take it to the assembly of the Earth community and if the assembly is ignored then that person puts themselves outside the Earth community."

Attention must be given to the other-than-human as this is where we will hear the voice of the God, who is with us in Jesus (see Mt 1:23 and 18:20) at this time.

Such a retelling challenges our imagination in relation to how we listen to or engage with the other-than-human with whom we are in community as much as with other humans. The Season of Creation may be a time for such creative imagining of our biblical tradition including our Gospels. This, in turn, may assist in the expanding of our consciousness just as the Jesus story expanded Jewish religious consciousness in the first century.

17 September – Matthew 18:21-35

Matthew 18:21-35 is difficult from a number of perspectives including the ecological. It deals with the challenging issue of forgiveness which cannot be limited to Peter's proposal of seven times but rather must be 70 times seven, or 70 times and seven, either of which is infinite.

We are aware that the breakdown of relationships that need forgiveness is not confined to human relationships but can be extended to those between the human and other-than-human. Natural forces such as wind and rain, movements of earth and fire can very quickly destroy human communities. What is the forgiveness that these call from human communities? And we are also aware of the ways in which the human community has destroyed and disrupted the ecology of Earth. Forgiveness must be mutual and infinite and it needs to be learnt. This is what the difficult parable Mt 18:23-37 wants to teach. However, it is necessary to read against the grain of the violence encoded in it. This, too, is to be read ecologically.

24 September – Matthew 20:1-16

The parable of the labourers (Mt 20:1-16) focuses almost exclusively on right relationships or justice within the human community. However, we can imagine the rich and

complex interrelationships of material and social features woven into this text. The vineyard itself needs the workers' attention and the owner who hires them. There are certain times of the day for the labourers to begin work and keep working. We can imagine the soil needing to be tilled, the vines heavy with grapes and the hired labourers working under the heat of the sun.

The parable hinges on the pivotal question: Is your eye evil because I am good or generous? It picks up the cultural feature of the "evil eye" associated with envy – envy in the face of the generosity of the landowner. This is an example of the socio-cultural features lying within the text. The parable challenges us to attend to the ecological clues – material, cultural and socio-political – threaded into the first-century story and to explore their significance now.

The parable is so rich in features, as the one noted above, that it readily lends itself to an ecological retelling. The Season of Creation gives us an ideal time for furthering this exploration. ■

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An Ecological Reading of Matthew 24:1-14

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT suggests a way of thinking about the “end time” accounts as our challenge to develop ethical integrity now.

As we near the end of the Gospel of Matthew and as we turn our sights to the end of another liturgical year, it is not surprising to find end-time emphases in our biblical texts and our liturgical traditions. The question that faces the ecological reader is whether these texts and traditions can serve an ecological ethic.

John Haught in, *Resting on the Future: Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe*, speaks of three ways in which the biblical and theological traditions depict the relationship between humanity and the cosmos. He says the the third way, what he calls an *anticipatory* approach, can best incorporate an ecological ethic. The anticipatory approach recognises the unfinished nature of the universe and its potential unfolding which is to come, “groaning to reveal the divine”. The human and other-than-human communities are caught up in this unfolding, and invited to participate in and contribute to it in their present. It is here that we can locate our ecological ethics.

Biblical eschatology, or “end time” stories, likewise recognises that our universe is unfinished and that this has implications for the present. We tend to think of eschatology as linear and future-oriented — focusing on the fate of the universe and the human

community. However, scholars suggest that when the gospel traditions were developing in the first century, the temporal focus of eschatological writing was on the present rather than the future. This was because the first-century mind imagined a future which made ethical demands of the community now — the future and the present were intimately related.

Future Folding Back on Present

Matthew 24 opens with Jesus and the disciples grounded in the material and the temporal. Leaving the Temple, the disciples draw Jesus’ attention to the collection of buildings they have just left. Jesus predicts that the Temple will be torn down to the extent that there is not one stone on another.

It may be that the Matthean community, living in conflict with their Pharisaic neighbours in post-70 CE Galilee, was writing about their own experience after the Roman War and its attendant destruction of the temple, into the life of Jesus. The narrative takes on the dimension of apocalyptic eschatology, or a “future as present”, that leads readers into the discourse to follow. It also invites the ecological reader to recognise the present destruction of species and habitats in our contemporary time as symbolic or evocative of a future cataclysm. And, like the future destruction of the temple, the narrative folds back onto the present with an ethical challenge to today’s global population.

The ecological reader caught up in the apocalyptic imagery will also

be attentive to the simplicity of Jesus sitting on the Mount of Olives, sitting on the ground just as he sat on the mountain in Galilee (Mt 5:1). In each instance, the ground can be seen to authorise the story that follows.

The disciples’ questions: “When will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”, address the present of the Matthean community experiencing the destruction of the Temple, the imminent return of Jesus, and the “end of the age” which belongs to the imaginary future. That future is in the hands of God but folds back onto the now.

Read the Signs of the Times

Jesus’ initial reply to the disciples’ eschatological questions about *when* and *what* is highly significant: “Beware that no one leads you astray” (Mt 24:4). This is one of those contemporary *ethical* demands inherent in eschatology and can be seen to infuse the whole discourse: the end times are in the hands of God, in imaginary time, but you, the listeners/readers, are in the now, the now of ethical integrity.

As this section unfolds (Mt 24:4-8), we hear described what has been and continues to be the fate of the entire Earth community — wars and famines and earthquakes. These eschatological images are drawn from the prophets, or from the actual experiences of the Matthean audience for whom war and rumours of war, famine and earthquakes were a very present reality.



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Image of Birth Pangs

I want to draw particular attention to the image that closes this section, namely the phrase “the beginning of the birth pangs”. First, it draws powerful female imagery into the unfolding narrative and reminds readers of the materiality, the corporeality that infuses all the imagery. It also alerts readers to the dominant maleness that characterises the text and which continually needs to be critiqued.

Present Actions Predict the Future

Apart from this final image, Mt 24:4-8 uses cataclysmic events from the more-than-human world to image the future potential for the Matthean community.

This stands as a challenge to contemporary ecological readers whose concept of time is linear rather than cyclical. It invites us to see the impact of present actions not on a future which we envisage as distant and separate from ourselves now, but rather as circling back on our time — fracked earth, polluted waters and air, destruction of species and environmentally-induced human illnesses. This is an ecological apocalyptic eschatology.

Present Actions Predict Relationships in Our World

The next segment (Mt 24:9-14) focuses on the breakdown of human relationships which, like the destruction of the temple, the Matthean community may well be experiencing. The material and the

social are woven into the language of the text in which Jesus predicts a future of conflict for those he sends out (see also Mt 10:16-23). We find parallel language to that of Mt 24:13: “anyone who endures to the end will be saved” (Mt 10:22).

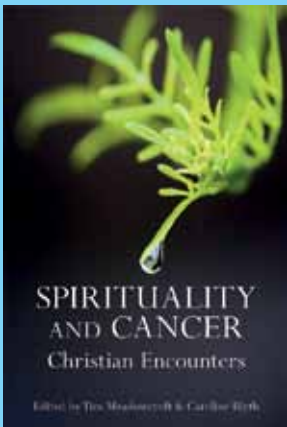
Freed to Fullness of Life

To be saved can be understood as participating in the work of Jesus and the gospel as a “freeing”. As such it includes not only a freeing of humans but a freeing of Earth into the fullness of being. Mt 24:14 suggests that such freeing/saving is a core understanding of the Gospel of the *basileia* named almost exclusively throughout this narrative as the “*basileia* of the heavens or the skies”.

This is a new ordering, a new cosmology, a new ecology in which relationships will be ordered rightly. This *basileia* is characterised as/by an ethic, a right ordering of relationships in the present. The end/the *telos* points toward the time when the ethic of the “Gospel of the *basileia*” has been proclaimed and lived within the *oikoumenē* — the entire inhabited earth, the world.

This first-century text draws us, the readers, into a future that supports our ethical life, but it also holds a mirror to the future to reflect a profound ecological ethic for our present. 🕊

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An Ecological Reading of Matthew 25:31-46

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT points to the ecological impact of the parable of the goats and sheep in Matthew 25:31-46 as calling us to care for our common home.

As the Year of Matthew in the Sunday Lectionary draws to a close (26 November 2017), the Church celebrates the feast of the Universal or the Cosmic Christ. The Gospel of Matthew offers an extraordinarily appropriate reading for this celebration in the last great parable Mt 25:31-46.

Matthew 25:31 "When the Human One comes in glory, with all the angels,

then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand: 'Come, you that are blessed ..., inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' 37 Then the righteous

will answer him: 'When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40 And the Human One will answer them: 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'" (NRSV)

Jesus the Teacher and Parabler concludes the fifth and last of the great discourses that constitute the Matthean gospel story with what we might call an end-time parable which makes use of cosmic imagery. The parable is replete with ethics, the right ordering of relationships within the human and other-than-human community. There is an identification and a separation of the ethical and the unethical or the righteous and unrighteous (Mt 25: 45-46), imaged as sheep and goats (Mt 25:32 – note here the care we need to take with such imaging, especially in its possible caricaturing of animals).

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Meeting the Needs of Others

This time of final separation is projected as “the end” when the Human One/Jesus comes “in his glory”. Of all the future imaginings contained in eschatological discourse (Mt 24-25), this one demonstrates most strongly that those imaginings are intended to circle back into the ethical now. Those who address the essential material needs of others are called blessed because they give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing to the naked, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned. They re-order or order in right relationship (*dikaïosynē* or righteousness/justice, a strong Matthean theme) not just the human but the other-than-human and the interrelationship of the two.

This is the most explicit, the most material of Jesus’ ethical teaching. As you do this re-ordering of relationships both material and social, among “the least”/lowest in status, you are doing it to me/*emoi*. When you do not do this re-ordering of relationships among “the least”, you are not doing it to me/*emoi*.

This is an ethic for the *now* of the Matthean community and for the *now* of communities today. It is an ethic that can catch the human and other-than-human in a re-ordering of right relationships. If such an ethic, such a right ordering, were to be undertaken by today’s human communities in their relationships with all in the other-than-human communities around planet Earth, this would truly manifest the *basileia* of the heavens (the kin[g]dom of the heavens or the skies, the heart of Jesus message – Mt 3:2; 4:17; 5:3, 10, 19; 7:21; 10:7).

The last great parable of Matthew’s gospel has inspired heroic and hidden “works of mercy” toward all those in the human community who suffer in any way. So, too, may it now, through Pope Francis’s proclamation of care for our common home, inspire new heroic and hidden works of mercy that will ensure care for not only our planet but also our cosmos.

New Works of Mercy

It is to such a re-ordering of right relationships especially between the human and other-than-human communities that Pope Francis directs us in *Show Mercy to Our Common Home*, his message for the celebration of the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation last year.

Francis says again what he made clear in *Laudato Si’* that the “sufferings of the poor” and the “devastation of the environment” (LS par 1) are intimately connected. He names crimes against the natural world as “sin” (LS par 2). So this allows us to place them within the Matthean

gospel’s call to repentance, the message of both John the Baptist (Mt 3:2) and Jesus (Mt 4:17).

Then, informed by this great Matthean parable, Pope Francis named an eighth corporal and an eighth spiritual work of mercy: care for our common home.

He said: “Let me propose a complement to the two traditional sets of seven: may the works of mercy also include care for our common home.

“As a *spiritual* work of mercy, care for our common home calls for a “grateful contemplation of God’s world” (LS par 214) which “allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us (LS par 85).

“As a *corporal* work of mercy, care for our common home requires “simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness” and “makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world” (LS par 230-31).

The last great parable of Matthew’s gospel has inspired heroic and hidden “works of mercy” toward all those in the human community who suffer in any way. So, too, may it now, through Pope Francis’s proclamation of care for our common home, inspire new heroic and hidden works of mercy that will ensure care for not only our planet but also our cosmos.

The celebration of the Cosmic Christ on 26 November with the last great parable of Jesus invites us to ponder more deeply the call of Pope Francis to this eighth work of mercy: care for our common home. ■

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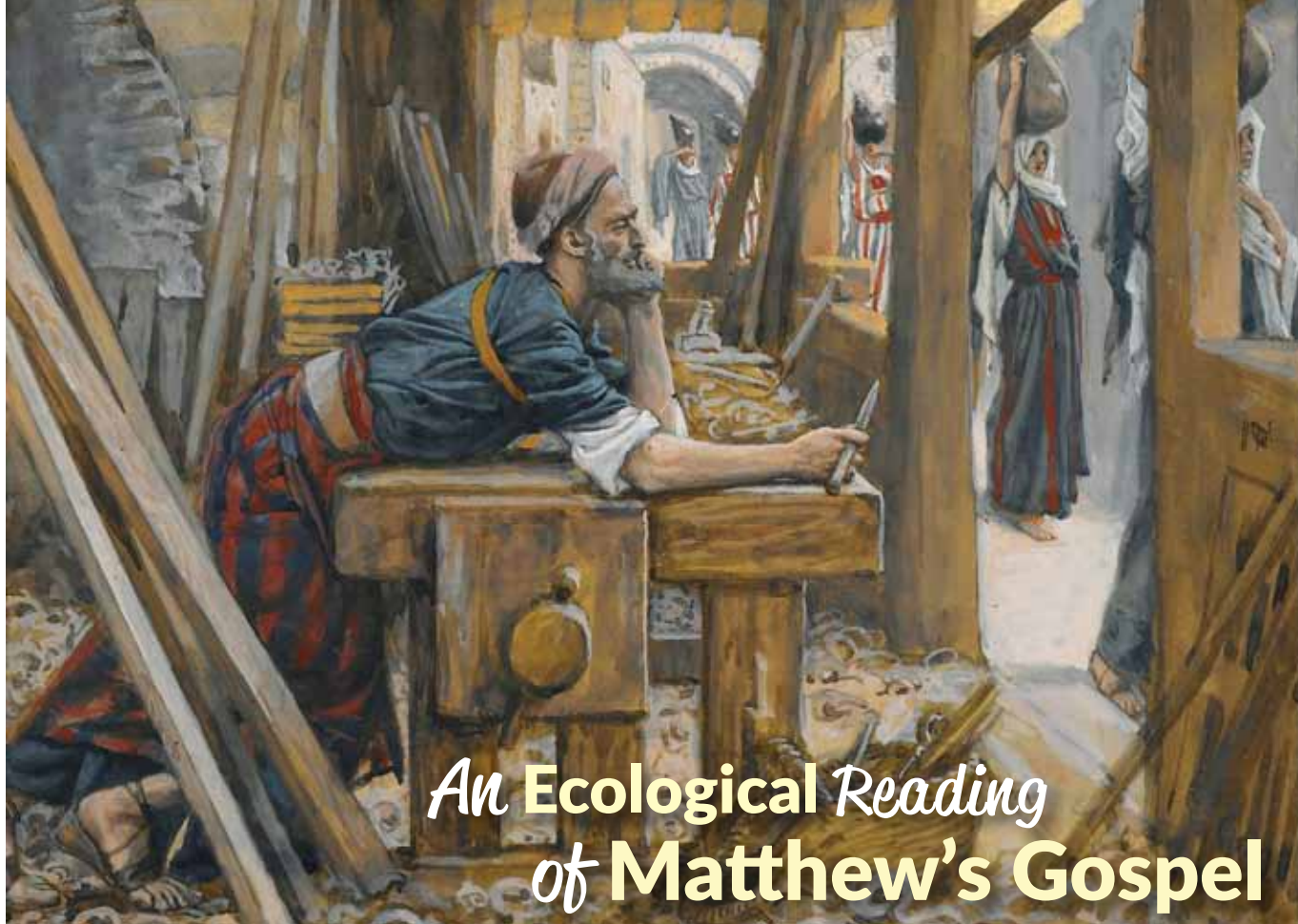


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An Ecological Reading of Matthew's Gospel

In my column in February (*TM* issue 212, 2017: 20-21) I looked at the opening verse of the Gospel of Matthew 1:1: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christos, son of David, son of Abraham.” I noted that the phrase “book of the genealogy” appears first in the biblical narrative in Gen 2:4 where it refers to the genealogy of the “heavens and the earth”, the cosmos. It is not until Gen 5:1-2 that we find reference to the “book of the genealogy” of the human community, male and female. So the very beginning of the Matthean Gospel sets the story of Jesus, the one named “the human one” (Mt 9:6; 10:23; 11:19; 12:8, 40 and elsewhere), not only within the human story but also within the story of the cosmic and Earth communities. This story is constantly expanding, capturing our imaginations and our very being in new ways. It seems appropriate then at the end of 2017, and in this time of Advent, to turn our ecological lens on the story of the birth of Jesus Christos.

The Matthean genealogy repeats

39 times that *male* (eg, Abraham) engendered/gave birth to *male* (eg, Isaac). This obscures the pregnant female body that embraces and sustains each one born in the genealogy. And even more, this patrilineage obscures myriad Earth processes. The Matthean narrative re-turns readers to the materiality of pregnancy and birth in Mt 1:18 which opens with the words: “The birth of Jesus took place in this way”. As this verse unfolds — “when his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” — material and socio-cultural elements intertwine.

The salvation promised in the birth of this child can also be envisaged ecologically.

We find the betrothal period of Jewish law is the temporal setting of Mt 1:18-25 and it points to the future potential of a shared physical space for Joseph and Mary: “before they lived together”. Time and space, two keys to the ecological, play within this opening verse.

Other aspects of habitat seem shadowy or almost absent in the story.

But the materiality of pregnancy is not shadowy or absent: Mary has a child in her womb (*en gastri echousa*). The gestating child has a habitat—*en gastri*, in the womb, in the body of the woman Mary, his mother.

Anne Elvey has drawn attention to the significance of the pregnant body in her writing. She claims evocatively that the birth of the child from the pregnant woman also evokes the birth of the mother. In the Matthean narrative, *mētēr*/mother occurs first in Mt 1:18 in relation to the *genesis* of Jesus when both the mother (Mary) and the child (Jesus) are born in and through their interconnectedness with/in the pregnant body. Almost before readers can appreciate the materiality of this pregnancy and the birth of Mary as mother, however, the Matthean narrator inserts the phrase *ek pneumatos hagiou* (Mt 1:18, 20 — from, out of, or by a spirit that is holy), to describe the genesis of Jesus.

The Australian eco-theologian, Denis Edwards, envisions this Spirit that is holy as the one “breathing life into the universe in all its stages: into its laws and initial conditions, its origin and its evolution”. It is this Spirit that links the birth of the human Jesus to all other births, not only of human

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births but of the more-than-human or Earth constituents, in the ongoing becoming of what is new. Therefore, in this view, the Spirit can be linked to the genealogy of the heavens/sky and the Earth in its unfolding over billions of years and through multiple processes. This same Spirit is also intimately connected to the unfolding of the male and female genealogy and to Jesus' particular birth in the story. Habitat, human and the holy are intertwined. If we can read our gospel narrative in this way then it, in turn, can read us anew, shaping an ecological consciousness.

recognises a particular moment in the unfolding of the Earth story in and through which traces of the divine are revealed in a particular human/earthed being, Jesus. G*d has been "with us" from the beginning as indicated in the opening of the genealogy. G*d is now with us, the contemporary Earth community, in and through the birth of this particular child in all his materiality and his con-textuality within a web of multiple interrelationships.

The Gospel of Matthew ends on a similar note when the risen Jesus promises the disciples to "be with you" to the

Matthew 1: 18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he

had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord

through the prophet: 23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of God commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (NRSV)

The repetition of the phrase *ek pneumatos hagiou*/from, out of, or by a spirit that is holy in Mt 1:20 turns the reader from the materiality of betrothal, pregnancy and potential birth, to the divine purpose of this birth conveyed in the words of an angel: "He will save this people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). We usually read the theme of salvation/saving in the biblical narrative from either a human or a divine perspective — political and prophetic characters such as Moses, Joshua and Isaiah are potential saviours of Israel who rescue the people from oppressors. Likewise the Divine Saviour rescues socio-politically and also from what is named as sin. An ecological reader will bring new questions to this theme.

It is not difficult to imagine these questions as the language of "saving" threads through our ecological consciousness and our ecological networks and communities. We speak of *saving* species from extinction, *saving* old-growth forests from logging for purely economic gains, or saving planet Earth from the ravages of the human community. This violence and destruction can be named as "sin" in our times. Jesus, whom the angel proclaims as "saving this people from their sins", can be understood and interpreted as permeating not only social, cultural and political processes towards transforming newness. Such saving can be and needs also to be read in relation to what we now name as ecological sins so that the *salvation* promised in the birth of this child can also be envisaged ecologically. The Earth and the cosmos participate in the saving transformation that we so often limit to humankind.

Such an expanded consciousness can also inform our reading of Isaiah's text quoted in Mt 1:23: "Look, the virgin/the young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us'"

G*d is with "us", Earth and all Earth's constituents within the cosmos. This evocation is not of a particular geographical, historical, political and economic community but of all who participate in the biotic and abiotic cosmic community within the context of a new ecological awareness. The Matthean depiction of Jesus as "G*d with us"

"end of the age" (Mt 28:20). As in Mt 1:23 the "you" like the "us" need not be limited to the human community. Rather, it can extend to the entire Earth community and beyond to the all that is in the cosmos. What an extraordinary vision the opening and closing of the Gospel of Matthew can offer to those whose eyes are becoming open to the ecological, to the cosmic ✨

[Ed] This is Elaine's last column of an ecological reading of the Gospels. She will continue to write for Tui Motu on occasion.

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