



Photo by DOC. The recent South Westland coastal cleanup

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT suggests that we read Sirach with protection and love of all creation in mind.

Sirach 35:12-14, 16-19

“Our God is a God of Justice
 Who knows no favourites
 Who hears the cry of the oppressed and shows justice to the poor.
 God listens to the plea of the injured party
 Does not ignore the orphan’s supplication nor the widow’s as she pours out her story.
 Those who with their whole heart serve God will be accepted
 their petitions will carry to the clouds.
 The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds;
 Until it arrives they are inconsolable,
 Nor will they desist until the Most High takes notice of them
 Acquits the virtuous and delivers judgment.
 Indeed, God will not delay.”

This biblical text is from the Book of Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach), one of the books that belong to the Wisdom literature, which emerged from the sages in Israel reflecting on life. It tends, therefore, to be anthropocentric but it also has the potential to be read ecologically.

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis recognises “the effects of modern anthropocentrism” as one of these roots of the ecological crisis. Such an anthropocentrism places the human person “over” all else in the universe, as having dominion. Francis suggests that we bring the critical lens of “dominion” to our relationships with the environment, within the human community and with God, if we are to bring healing to our world and our times.

The first five lines of the extract from Sirach speak of God as of Justice. This is the God we engage with on our journey to greater ecological awareness and ecological commitment. And justice does not belong only within the human community. The text invites us – indeed impels us

to engage with the God of the cosmos and to act justly in relation to Earth but also the entire universe. God is a God of Justice who knows no favourites in this universe.

As the words of the sage unfold, we are invited to “hear the cry of the oppressed” and to “show justice to the poor”. Today, with social justice at the forefront of our minds, we are familiar with invitations such as these – and as the sage continues, this familiarity is affirmed.

As ecological listeners, we are invited to expand our consciousness. “Our God is a God of Justice”, we can understand as an ecological and cosmic justice – beyond and including human justice. “Who knows no favourites” shows that the stars and planets, the depths of the oceans and all their creatures, are to be given the same weight as humanity. “Who hears the cry of the oppressed and shows justice to the poor” refers to a “who” beyond the human – the planet itself can make this cry, and we are reminded that the cries are heard equally: “God listens to the pleas of the injured party”. Finally, we are told that God “Does not ignore the orphan’s supplication nor the widow’s as she pours out her story” – God is attentive to the most threatened, whether species or the materiality of all life within the cosmos.

The sage continues and the focus shifts to the one who is in right relationship with the Divine: those who with their whole heart serve God. Their petitions shall “carry to the clouds” and their prayer “pierces the clouds”. While this imagery may have functioned symbolically for the sage, as ecological readers with a cosmic vision, we can allow ourselves to be caught up into an expanding view of the universe. The concluding words of the sage in this poem – indeed God will not delay – can function to alert us to the urgency of the cry rising up in our time, not just from the Earth but from the cosmos. We cannot remain, or survive, in our anthropocentrism. 🗨️



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