A Precious Gift

Caring For Our Common Home[1]

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Introduction

Books, articles, talks and sermons that share a concern for our environment tend to highlight the crisis we are facing, how it manifests itself and the impact it is having or is projected to have. Celia Deane-Drummond, one of the leading ecotheologians, has pointed out that anyone approaching environmental issues from a Christian perspective must 'consider how far and to what extent the Bible might support, or even work against, a specific concern for the natural environment.'[2]

The first, rather obvious point to note is that the biblical texts were not written to address the environmental questions we are facing today. Until relatively recently, our reading of the Bible, much as our engagement with the natural world, has been almost exclusively anthropocentric. We have reduced nature to an environment in which we happen to live or to resources that, at best, we must seek to 'use' more responsibly. Similarly, our reading of the biblical texts has focused on God's relationship with humanity, leading us to pay scant attention to the wider creation or the place of non-human creatures within creation.

Another important consideration is our terminology. I have already indicated that talk about the 'environment', while drawing attention to the habitat in which we live, tends to limit our world to little more than the stage on which the human drama unfolds. 'Nature', in turn, refers to the natural, physical or material world, the subject of the natural sciences. Although humanity is clearly part of nature, the term is most commonly understood as referring to the non-human part of the world. In addition to these, our tradition has bequeathed to us another term, 'creation'. This, too, being a specifically Christian idiom, has its limitations, not least with its linking to creationism. And yet, with its combined stress

on the divine origin, the giftedness and the all-encompassing sphere of the created order, human and non-human, it remains the most helpful term for biblical and theological reflection.

Following Lynn White's influential 1967 article 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', in which he blamed Christianity for the crisis, much thinking has focused on Genesis 1:28: 'Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground.'[3] This, White believed, endorses human domination over the rest of nature; while others have argued that it should be interpreted as demanding human stewardship, care and service for the earth rather than its exploitation. However, the emphasis has now begun to shift away from human stewardship towards a more encompassing, reciprocal, unitive understanding of our relationship with the created world.

So why should we care about our world? Responses to this question often are of a highly pragmatic nature. The more aware we are of the environmental dangers, the more we understand that we cannot afford not to care, or we shall have to face the grim prospect of a severe loss of quality of life or indeed the loss of life itself. Some believe this type of pragmatic approach is the only one standing any chance of success. Surely, only blunt self-interest will persuade people to start acting in more considerate ways towards our common home. While Celia Deane-Drummond is right in pointing out that there is a plurality of biblical voices, I would like to focus on some Old Testament texts that point well beyond such a pragmatic, egotistical way of being in the world.

Land as Gift and Cause for Thanksgiving

My starting point is the understanding of life as pure gift or radical grace, the realisation and celebration that everything we have, the earth, the land and everything that comes from it, is God's gift to us:

> Then you should solemnly state before the Lord your God: 'The Lord brought us out of Egypt. ... He brought us to this place and gave us this land – a land full of milk and honey. So now I am bringing the early produce of the fertile ground that you, Lord, have given me.' Then celebrate all the good things the Lord your God has done for you and your family. (Deut. 26:5, 8-11)

Passages like this affirm a belief and trust in a generous God at the heart

of reality. This is a profoundly countercultural understanding that challenges our exploitative way of being in the world, the assumption that we own this planet and can do with it whatever we like, that we can 'use' it to our heart's content.

In ancient Israel's worldview, awareness of the giftedness of everything leads to thanksgiving. The biblical writers insist on festivals being celebrated each year, knowing that only regular acts of thanksgiving can keep the awareness of the gift alive. The dynamic of gift and thanksgiving was fundamental to Israel's life and faith, whose festivals provided a seasonal rhythm of thanksgiving. Year on year, that rhythm reminded the people that everything they had they owed to their God. And year on year, the festivals prompted them to give thanks to that God for all they had received.

Even so, the temptation to forget both the gift and the giver remained a strong one:

> But watch yourself! Don't forget the Lord your God. .... When you eat, get full, build nice houses, and settle down, and when your herds and your flocks are growing large, your silver and gold are multiplying, and everything you have is thriving, don't become arrogant, forgetting the Lord your God. .... Don't think to yourself, My own strength and abilities have produced all this prosperity for me. Remember the Lord your God! He's the one who gives you the strength to be prosperous. (Deut. 8:11-17)

The people were only too easily seduced into imagining that what they had was theirs due to their own efforts and accomplishments. In their consciousness, they ceased to be recipients of the land, assuming the role of its controllers. As Bruggemann has pointed out, they no longer saw themselves as creatures of grace but as managers of their own achievements, with all the destructive consequences that are so evident to us today.[4]

'Our human task is to be thankful', Rowan Williams said in his inaugural sermon as Archbishop of Canterbury in 2003.[5] 'All of life is a resounding call to gratitude', Lonni Pratt, a writer on Benedictine hospitality, affirms, expressing, like Williams, a sensibility that is deeply rooted in the Old Testament.[6] As those ancient writers knew and celebrated, our very lives and the world in which we live are pure gift, a gift to which the only proper response is gratitude, a gift we would do

well to treat with respect and care.

There are some practical applications of this, not least the practice of the regular celebration of and thanksgiving for the gift of the earth, which is an important contribution that Christian communities might be able to make. It is worth asking whether there might not be opportunities here for us to reconnect with the wider communities within which we live in fresh, creative, life-giving ways, celebrating together the precious gift of our common home.

Thomas Merton and the Huge Chorus of Living Beings

The Old Testament and Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk thoroughly steeped in its thought, language and sensibilities, show us a way to a deeper understanding of our world, a way of relationship, sheer amazement, awe and growing love. It is a way that can lead to the recalibration of our hearts, minds and souls so we can learn to be with God's creation rather than merely use, exploit or even protect it for our own benefits. Merton's writings predate much of our current knowledge and concerns about the environment, and yet the importance of his observations and reflections on nature has been increasingly recognized in recent years.

'Perhaps the most crucial aspect of Christian obedience to God today concerns the responsibility of the Christian in technological society toward God's creation and God's will for His creation,' Merton wrote in 1965.[7] At the time, that was a truly prophetic statement but, more than fifty years on, it is still far from common for Christians to conclude that responsibility for God's creation might be 'the most crucial aspect of [their] obedience to God'. That aside, the main reason for heeding Merton lies in his very perception of God's creation, which shares so much with the Old Testament writers and can illuminate their perspectives for us.

Merton could talk about the 'huge chorus of living beings [that] rises up out of the world beneath my feet: life singing in the watercourses, throbbing in the creeks and the fields and the trees, choirs of millions and millions of jumping and flying and creeping things.'[8] Another time, he noticed 'a small nation' of frogs, 'the innocent nation, chanting blissfully in praise of the spring rain;'[9] or the whistling of the quails, 'the voice of the present moment, the present festival';[10] or the 'gentle contemplative song of crickets'.[11]

In a prose poem depicting humanity's greed, consumption, arrogant ignorance and violence, Merton, in beautiful language and imagery reminiscent of the Old Testament, envisages a more humane alternative

scenario, expressed by nature:

> The fields will laugh, the woods will be drunk with flowers of rebellion. ... Every plant that stands in the light of the sun is a saint and an outlaw. Every tree that brings forth blossoms without the command of man is powerful in the sight of God. Every star that man has not counted is a world of sanity and perfection. Every blade of grass is an angel singing in the shower of glory.[12]

There is talk here of nature, God's non-human creation, singing, chanting and whistling; of it being characterised by laughter, rebellious drunkenness, light, glory and sanity. Merton speaks of a festival, an important concept in his perception of the natural world. On one occasion, he laments that we 'cannot understand that rain is a festival', that we do not appreciate its gratuity.[13]

Frogs chant blissfully in praise of the rain; choirs of millions and millions celebrate the mere fact of being alive, of being able to jump and fly and creep. And yet, for Merton, there is a deeper, more profound dimension to all this: 'The special clumsy beauty of this particular colt on this April day in this field under these clouds ... declares the glory of God.'[14] And in prayer to God he realizes:

> Today, Father, this blue sky lauds you. The delicate green and orange flowers of the tulip poplar tree praise you. The distant blue hills praise you, together with the sweet-smelling air that is full of brilliant light. The bickering flycatchers praise you with the lowing cattle and the quails that whistle over there.[15]

'I too, Father, praise you', he concludes, 'with all these my brothers, and they give voice to my own heart.' Being immersed in the natural world leads Merton to recognize the creatures' praise of God, praise that consists in simply being who they were created to be. What better prayer, what better glorification of God, what better expression of gratitude before God could there possibly be? For Merton, 'all creation teaches us some way of prayer.'[16]

Being with nature also led him to recognize his relatedness to all God's creatures. He talks about 'his sense of total kinship' with some little myrtle warblers, 'as if they and I were of the same nature, and as if that

nature were nothing but love.'[17] And he describes 'a spring morning alone in the woods ... the ceremonies of the birds feeding in the wet grass. The meadowlark feeding and singing.' Observing all this, he realizes 'how absolutely central' is the recognition 'that we are first of all *part of nature*.'[18]

Merton, perhaps more than anything else, teaches us the crucial importance of awareness, of being present to our world with open eyes and ears, indeed, with all our senses attuned to the amazing sensuous beauty of this world. This, Merton believed and experienced, leads to a deeper realization and understanding of the true nature of our world as God's precious, beautiful creation.

'I know,' he says in deceptively simplistic, almost naïve sounding words, 'there are trees here. I know there are birds here. I know the birds in fact very well ... I share this particular place with them: we form an ecological balance.'[19] Prayerful awareness of the natural world allow us to perceive and value the essential unity of God's creation; and it leads to love, joy, thanks and praise, which, for Merton, is not so much a special spiritual act 'but rather [our] simple, normal, obvious function, without which it is hard to see how [we] can be human.'[20]

The Old Testament Chorus of Praise and Celebration

Thomas Merton was a prolific poet who saw God's creation and expressed what he saw with a poet's sensibilities. Turning again to the Old Testament, we find that it is the poets, most notably the psalm writers, who share a similar perspective and awareness. Indeed, steeped in the biblical writings as he was, it was these ancient writers who led Merton to approach God's creation in the way he did. As he put it:

> By the reading of scripture I am so renewed that all nature seems renewed around me and with me. The sky seems to be more pure, a cooler blue, the trees a deeper green, light is sharper on the outlines of the forest and the hills and the whole world is charged with the glory of God and I find fire and music in the earth under my feet.[21]

It is precisely because of the biblical texts' impact on Merton's perception of creation that his thoughts are so helpful to us. We have already seen how they help us move beyond mere pragmatic, or might it be better to say selfish, reasons to care for our common home. I have focused on Merton's awakening to the created world to highlight how the biblical

texts can shape how we see, perhaps even whether we truly see, our world. If, as we think about the environment, nature, our world, we ask what the Old Testament's relevance for us today might be, then this is where one of its key contributions lies.

Reflecting on God's creation, the writer of Psalm 19 has this to say:

> Heaven is declaring God's glory;
> the sky is proclaiming his handiwork.
> One day gushes the news to the next,
> and one night informs another what needs to be known.
> Of course, there's no speech, no words –
> their voices can't be heard –
> but their sound extends throughout the world;
> their words reach the ends of the earth. (Psalm 19:1-4)

By its mere existence, and faithfully day upon day, heaven, the sky, the firmament proclaims God's glory. Paradoxically, though there are no words, its words reach all the way to the ends of the earth. Yet again, it is about perception and awareness. As one commentator suggests, 'to the sensitive, the heavenly praise of God's glory may be an overwhelming experience [as it was for Merton], whereas to the insensitive, sky is simply sky.'[22] Noting that the term translated 'declare' 'may be used to express repetition of chants' that praise God, another commentator points out that the heavens 'not only "declare" the divine glory but also celebrate it in chanted melodies,' thus making their own joyful contribution to Merton's 'huge chorus of living beings'.[23]

The writer of Psalm 69 sees it as the task of all of creation to join in that chorus: 'Let heaven and earth praise God, the oceans too, and all that moves within them' (v. 34). Heaven and earth, the sea and all that moves within them have been created to praise God. This is a far cry from, and an important counter-perspective to, the utilitarian, self-centred and, as we are beginning to see, extremely dangerous and destructive view that regards nature, the non-human parts of our world, as a mere backdrop, a stage, an arena, an environment, as resources for an unfolding human drama. As Robert Daggy notes, it is 'because of our hubris, our ignorance, our indifference, our misconceptions' that non-human creatures, Merton's 'choirs of millions and millions', 'have been mistreated, endangered, and, in far too many cases, already extinguished.'[24]

Let us listen to the voice of another one of those perceptive Old Testament poets:

> Let heaven celebrate! Let the earth rejoice!
> Let the sea and everything in it roar!
> Let the countryside and everything in it celebrate!
> Then all the trees of the forest too
> will shout out joyfully
> before the Lord because he is coming! (Psalm 96:11-13)

Here the emphasis is on celebration, rejoicing, roaring and joyful shouting. Likewise Merton encourages us to see that everything, even the rain, which to him is 'a whole world of meaning, ... all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of dead leaves', is a festival.[25]

In Psalm 96, the roaring of the sea is expressed using a verb that can be translated as 'to thunder' or 'to storm', which, of course, is exactly what the sea does. The Psalm writer envisages it as expressing its celebration in the way only the sea can. The roaring is its very own version of joyful shouting, of celebrating its existence and coming of the Lord. But our poet moves beyond the big picture – heaven, earth and sea – to the countryside and the trees in the forest, which will 'shout out joyfully'. We encounter similar perceptions in Psalm 98:

> Let the sea and everything in it roar;
> the world and all its inhabitants too.
> Let all the rivers clap their hands;
> let the mountains rejoice out loud altogether before the Lord
> because he is coming to establish justice on the earth!
> (Psalm 98:7-9)

Having begun with the sea and the world, the writer then focuses on rivers and mountains. Again, there is a joyous, noisy celebration, as part of which the rivers shall 'clap their hands'. When the prophet Isaiah promises God's exiled people that they 'will go out with celebration' and 'be brought back in peace', he envisages God's creation celebrating that momentous event: 'Even the mountains and the hills will burst into song before you; all the trees of the field will clap their hands.' (Isaiah 55:12) Commenting on these texts, Celia Deane-Drummond notes that 'in most cases the praise stems from creation's acknowledgement of it being created the way it is.'[26] This is evident in Psalm 148 where every element of creation is called upon to praise God 'because God gave the command and they were created.' (Psalm 148:5)

Sustained Attention as the Path Towards a Contemplative Ecology

One of the Old Testament's distinctive contributions to our current environmental debate lies in re-orientating us, in offering important countercultural perspectives, in helping us to become newly aware of the giftedness and the essential unity of a world that, by its very existence, is continuously singing its creator's praises. Along with Merton, the Old Testament poets can help us to *see* our world, to see it in its richness and diversity. In doing so, they can play an important part in recalibrating our attitude towards God's precious, beautiful creation.

In a book on contemplative ecology, Douglas Christie points out that it is our 'habits of careless inattention that have put [our] ecosystem in jeopardy.'[27] As a result, we are losing more and more of the natural world and its creatures, more and more of what so delighted and filled Thomas Merton and the ancient psalmists with awe and reverence, more and more of what the Catholic priest and ecotheologian Thomas Berry has described as 'splendid and intimate modes of divine presence'. Indeed, Berry worries that 'we are, perhaps, losing ourselves.'[28] Christie has similar concerns: 'In a world made desolate, the presence of the sacred and life itself will be lost to us. And with it will be lost our capacity for intimacy, delight, and wonder.'[29]

Thomas Merton and the Old Testament psalmists, along with many other contemplative voices throughout history, show us a better way. They enable us to see that, as Christie notes:

> Only a sustained practice of attention can help restore us to an awareness of who we are in relation to the larger whole that is rooted in authentic respect and reverence. Only such a renewed awareness can inform the kind of sustained action that will be required to realize lasting ecological restoration.[30]

Sustained action, an ecologically aware and transformative lifestyle, requires sustained awareness and that means, as Christie highlights, 'cultivating a habit of attention and regard that has for too long eluded us – a form of contemplative practice in which regard for the natural world occupies a central place.' What is required is for such attention to become 'part of sustained spiritual discipline.'[31]

As Merton knew and expressed so powerfully, it was his immersion in the scriptures and the daily chanting of the psalms that helped awaken him, making him aware of, and present to, the world around him, renewing

his senses so nature itself seemed renewed around him and he could see the cooler blues and deeper greens of nature, that 'the whole world is charged with the glory of God and I feel fire and music in the earth under my feet.'[32] Similarly, we need to learn to see, to be present to the world around us, if we are to be able to love and care for God's creation.

Notes

Biblical texts have been quoted from the Common English Bible.

1. Pope Francis' encyclical letter of 2015, Laudato Si': Care for our common home, was a rallying call to each and every one of us to hear 'the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor'. In it, he asks us to be ecological citizens; to come together to deepen our commitment to protect the goodness and beauty of God's great gift.
2. Celia Deane-Drummond, *A Primer in Ecotheology: Theology for a Fragile Earth* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017), p. 19.
3. Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science* 10 March 1967, vol. 155, pp. 1203-1207.
4. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002 – 2nd ed.), pp. 52-53.
5. Rowan Williams, 'Enthronement Sermon'. Available at http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1624/enthronement-sermon (Accessed 14 July 2020).
6. Lonni C Pratt & Daniel Homan, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love.* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2011 – 2nd ed.), p. 203.
7. Journal entry, April 15, 1965 in: Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton* vol. 5, 1963-1965, Robert E. Daggy, ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 227.
8. Journal entry, July 5, 1952 in: Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: The Journals of Thomas Merton* vol. 2, 1941-1952, Jonathan Montaldo, ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 486. This entry forms part of the epilogue (Fire Watch) to *The Sign of Jonas.*
9. Journal entry, March 16, 1968 in: Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton* vol. 7, 1967-1968, Patrick Hart, ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 68.
10. 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (London: Burns and Oates, 1977), p. 21.
11. Journal entry, September 13, 1968, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 176.
12. 'Atlas and the Fatman', *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p. 80.
13. 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p. 7.
14. 'Things in Their identity', Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), p. 30.

15. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), p. 174.
16. 'Natural History', Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), p. 184. The Poem was originally included in *Figures for an Apocalypse* (1947).
17. Journal entry, November 4, 1964, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 162.
18. *Conjectures*, p. 287.
19. 'Day of a Stranger', *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 239.
20. *Conjectures*, p. 287.
21. Journal entry, August 8, 1949, *Entering the Silence*, p. 350.
22. Peter Craigie & Marvyn Tate, *Psalms 1-50 - Word Biblical Commentary* vol. 19 (Waco, TX:Word Books Publisher, 1983), p. 181.
23. Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), pp.209-210. The word 'declare' is also used in this sense in Psalm 96:3: 'Sing to the Lord! ... Declare [chant] God's glory among the nations.'
24. Robert Daggy, 'Choirs of Millions: Thomas Merton and God's Creatures', Presidential Address at the 2nd General Meeting of the ITMS, 13 June 1991, *The Seasonal*, vol. 16:3, Summer 1991, p. 11.
25. 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p. 8.
26. *A Primer in Ecotheology*, p. 28.
27. Douglas Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 29.
28. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*. (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1988), p. 8.
29. *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, p. 26.
30. *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, p. 29.
31. *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*, p. 30.
32. Journal entry, August 8, 1949, *Entering the Silence*, p. 350.

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