

Creatures and the soil community

The peaceable kingdom

Edward P. Echlin

SHARING A HOME WITH A CANINE PEKINESE and a garden with various soil creatures, I am struck at how much we sensate beings share. 'We's kin', as the Appalachian folk say. We are notably linked to other primates, especially the common chimpanzee.¹ As God's local sovereigns, humans live within a terrestrial soil community which includes flying descendants of dinosaurs, myriad – some undiscovered – micro-organisms, insects, and the diminishing living creatures of the waters. Included within the community are the plants and habitats upon which animals depend. An organic food grower, who feeds plants by feeding the soil, recognizes this symbiotic interdependence. 'Far from trying to destroy all life in his soil, his constant endeavour is to *increase* it,' writes John Seymour. 'He piles organic matter into his soil with the very object of encouraging the bacterial and fungal life that lives therein. He glories in the diversity of vegetables and animal life in and on his soil.'²

Visions of harmony

Beyond organic farms and gardens, disharmony among soil creatures remains. People fear and destroy large mammals, small reptiles, insects, molluscs, and strangers. Because this discord is so pervasive, extending sometimes even to *organic* beds – witness, for example, the onslaught on vegetables of aphids, slugs, and grey squirrels – human communities dream biodiverse dreams of peace among sensate beings. Before the Genesis story, there circulated in ancient Sumeria a hopeful picture of a land called Dilmun where:

no lion kills
 no wolf carries off a lamb.
 Unknown is a dog harassing kids,
 unknown is a hog devouring grain.
 (If) a widow spreads malt on the roof
 no bird of the skies comes foraging,
 no pigeon gorges itself.³

The peaceable kingdom of Isaiah (Isai 11:6–9), like Genesis and Dilmun, evokes nostalgic hope for a mythical harmony among God's creatures. Prior to Christian reinterpretation, in art and liturgy and imaginative hope, the poem was a joyful augury of an awaited Davidic prince. The poem evokes memories of Adam with the animals, and echoes the royal Psalm 8, quoted by Jesus in Jerusalem (Mt 21:16). The later Isaian literature borrows from the poem for imagery of 'a new heaven, and new earth' where, as in Genesis, the snake eats dust (Isai 65:25). Beyond the Jewish scriptures, pagan men dreamed similar impossible dreams. In the *Eclogues* (37 BC) Virgil describes a soil community where 'the soil will suffer hoes no more, nor vines the hook, the sturdy ploughman too will unleash his team'. Another Augustan-era favourite, Horace, went even further, in imagery that modern, unimaginative genetic modifiers are inclined to take literally.

tigers shall love to mate with deer,
and the dove shall pair with the kite,
the trustful herd fear not the tawny lion,
and the goat, grown smooth with scales,
shall love the briny waters of the sea.⁴

Reading the Bible imaginatively

Important biblical words, such as, for example, manger, king, and wisdom, have holistic connotations readily overlooked by urban exegetes and homilists. Michael Polanyi observes, 'Words of great human significance accumulate through the centuries an unfathomable fund of subsidiarily known connotations, which we can bring into focus by reflecting on the use of such words.'⁵ When St John says that in God's Word all things were made and the Word became flesh, his words imply that Jesus is both Creator and like ourselves embodied and related to other soil beings. Pope Leo I, reflecting on the New Testament, grasped these connotations: 'The one through whom the world was created would be brought forth in the midst of creation.'

Matthew's narrative, by its inclusion of the star, associates Balaam's donkey with the birth of our Saviour (Num 25:17). Luke's Bethlehem manger has, for Jewish Christianity, connotations of a text in Isaiah, 'The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib' (Isai 1:3). Mediaeval craftsmen, St Francis at Greccio, and Ignatius Loyola in the *Spiritual Exercises*, include animals, with shepherds and sheep, in the nativity story.⁶ In his youth, as Nathaniel and Pilate testify, Jesus is

associated with Nazareth in the hill country. The quiet Nazareth years were important for Jesus' familiarity with the animals of his bioregion, and for our imaginative contemplation of him especially within the olive plantations of his native hills. A sustainably cultivated olive plantation is one of the most biodiverse fields on earth, including wild and domestic animals, birds, insects, micro-organisms, and a host of herbs and plants. Greek yoghurt can remind us of the vibrant olive community known to the young Jesus. He learned about animals from his elders, especially his mother and extended family, in the fields beyond the white walls of Nazareth. There are flora and fauna remnants, perhaps lineal descendants of creatures he knew, in Nazareth old town today.

The oldest canonical gospel includes neither nativity, nor ox and ass, nor Nazareth boyhood. Mark hints, however, by associating the young Jesus with animals in the wilderness, that Jesus, Christ and Son of God, is the awaited peaceable prince. To people in dry climates struggling to harvest and conserve rainfall, the wilderness is a threat to families, to domestic animals, aquifers, gardens, and orchards. The wilderness threatens to encroach on cultivated soil. Olives and vines do not thrive in the wilderness with its scorching days and cold nights. Jesus' contemporaries feared wilderness animals. They knew little about them, but heard reports of conflicts in the Coliseum. Mark writes that Jesus was *with* the wild animals of the wilderness (Mk 1:13b). To be *with*, elsewhere in Mark, describes companionship (Mk 3:14; 5:18; 14:67). In the wilderness, the animals knew their master's face, and accompanied him.

In his brief public ministry, Jesus echoed some of the Jewish prejudices of his time, about dogs, swine, wolves, and reptiles (Mk 7:6–15). Unlike the Qumran community who forbade helping animals on the Sabbath, Jesus subscribed to the compassionate rabbinic tradition which allowed assisting stricken creatures even at Sabbath. 'Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it?' (Lk 13:15). 'Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well, will not immediately pull him out on a sabbath day?' (Lk 14:5). In comparing people *a fortiori* to small birds, sold for an *issar* at market, Jesus recognized the inherent worth of these creatures. He was neither philosophically learned with, nor did he subscribe to, the Stoic doctrine (later to be disseminated by Augustine) that (seemingly) irrational and inarticulate beings have value only for human use (Mt 12:11; 13:27; Lk 13:34). Jesus refers to the Jonah story, in which God pities the Ninevans and their many cattle (Mt 12:39–41;

Lk 11:29–30, 32). Even in the Gadarene story, when Jesus liberates the demons, it is *they* who drive the swine over the precipice (Mk 5:12–13 *et par*). In his months at Capernaum, and in other settlements near the lake, Jesus lived, as he had at Nazareth, in an olive, grain, grape and livestock biosystem, which included fishermen, marine birds, riparian flora and fauna, and sudden storms. When he left the lake for visits to Jerusalem, he frequently retired to the relative tranquillity of the olive mountain, and Gethsemane garden, as some visitors do today in that car-battered city. ‘Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus met there often with his disciples’ (Jn 18:2). Jesus may be described as the first Christian ecologist, not because he was a conservationist or animal welfare campaigner, but because he recognized his own importance in the arrival of God’s reign.⁷

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, in what John describes as a garden, the Christian community of apostles, disciples and followers, both Jew and gentile, gathered in the Holy City (Jn 19:41; Acts 2:19–21). Peter, in a foundational sermon at Pentecost, quoted the holistic Book of Joel. In Joel, as throughout the Jewish scriptures, when people suffer climatic nemesis, so do our fellow creatures. When we repent and worship rightly, animals share our blessing (Joel 1:18–20; 2:21–22). Through the Book of Joel, animals are included at the birth of the church.

The ascetic tradition

Throughout Christian history there has been, and there continues today, a lived ideal of harmony, a retrieval of Eden and of the Nazareth years, of the closeness of Jesus to nature, a foretaste of the awaited reign of God, the new heaven and the new earth. This ideal was lived especially by ascetics, some alone, others in communities. There are echoes in the ascetic tradition of the Jewish *Tu Bishvat*, the reconnecting with trees, and with memories and anticipations of Eden.⁸ The Christian ascetic ideal is that humans, as God’s subordinate sovereigns, should imitate our Creator and King, in neighbourly gentleness with people and the other creatures who share our planet and our destiny. John Chrysostom (d 407) says,

As the word ‘image’ indicated a similitude of command, so too ‘likeness’, with the result that we become like God to the extent of our human power – that is to say, we resemble him in our gentleness and mildness and in regard to virtue, as Christ also says, ‘Be like your Father in heaven.’⁹

St Catherine of Siena (d 1380), in a pre-critical age, was explicitly Christocentric in her reference to the ascetic's love of fellow creatures: 'The reason why God's servants love His creatures so deeply is that they realize how deeply Christ loves them. And this is the very character of love: to love what is loved by those we love.'¹⁰

One of the first solitaries was Antony of Egypt (d 356). Athanasius' early life of Antony, which became a mediaeval favourite, describes the love of the premier anchorite, for God, other solitaries, visitors and wild animals. Antony's outreach included lions, crocodiles, and camels, as well as cereals, date palms and olives. Antony was a pioneer Christian organic gardener, who nourished soil as well as plants. As in all organic gardening, there was occasionally a conflict of land use. The difference between Antony and at least this organic gardener is that when the holy man forbade animals to damage his crops, they obeyed him.

At first wild animals in the desert coming for water often would damage the beds in his garden. But he caught one of the animals, held it gently, and said to them all: 'Why do you do harm to me when I harm none of you? Go away and in the Lord's name do not come near these things again.'¹¹

Many ascetics are associated with birds, not merely because birds are evocative of prayer and the ascent of the person to God, but because, as fellow creatures, they have inherent value, they too glorify God. The influence of Antony and the Eastern desert radiated across the waters to Celtic and Saxon Christians on the world's fringe. When Kevin of Glendalough prayed in Celtic fashion with arms outstretched a black-bird nested in his hand. When in Kevin's presence, early soil exploiters proposed moving a wildlife habitat, so they could 'develop', with human technology, the wildlife habitat, Kevin objected in words that subsequent ages would be wise to ponder:

I have no wish that the creatures of God should be moved because of me: my God can help that place in some other fashion. And moreover, all the wild creatures on these mountains are my house-mates, gentle and familiar with me, and they would be sad of this that thou hast said.¹²

Cuthbert, a borderer related to both Celtic and Saxon cultures, is still remembered for his affinity with birds, domestic stock and sea creatures. According to Bede, birds obeyed him, as they had Antony.

Gardeners who object to blackbirds consuming cultivated currants, can empathize with Cuthbert's firmness with his winged contemporaries,

'Why are you eating crops you yourselves did not grow?' he asked the birds. 'Perhaps you have greater need of them than I. If God has given you permission, then do as He bade you; if not, be off with you, stop damaging other people's property.'¹³

Another ascetic, with links, like Cuthbert, to Celts and to Anglo-Saxons, is Guthlac who, also like Cuthbert, enjoyed the friendship of birds and water creatures. His biographer, Felix, reports that, when Guthlac placed a nesting basket under his eaves for the swallows, the birds dutifully reclined there.

They did not presume to choose a nesting-place without the permission of the man of God; and each year they came and sought from the man of God a sign to tell them where they were to dwell. Therefore, let it not seem absurd to anyone to learn the way of obedience from birds.¹⁴

Brendan, another Celtic saint associated with water creatures, and famous in the middle ages for his voyage across the western seas, with his monks sang psalms in unison with the birds. Bernard of Clairvaux found God in the birds singing among the beeches and the springs in the Forest of Clairvaux. The most famous bird saint of all, Francis of Assisi, reflecting imaginatively on Christ's words that God alone is good, exhorted the birds near the river at Bevagna to praise their Creator. 'From that day, he solicitously admonished all birds, all animals and reptiles, and even creatures that had no feeling, to praise and love their Creator.'¹⁵

The affection of saints – of different times, cultures, and habitats – for birds and other fellow creatures, recalls the symbiosis of the young Jesus with the animals of Nazareth, and the mature Jesus with wild animals of the wilderness. In their friendship with sensate creatures, the saints consciously imitated Jesus in his life on earth, and recognized him as Creator and Lord, 'Maker of statutes and stars.'

The Spiritual Exercises

Ignatius Loyola (d 1556), who enjoyed a profound grasp of the humanity and lordship of Jesus, contemplated the Bible, including the tacit depths, imaginatively, and gave a central place to imagination in his profound legacy, the Spiritual Exercises. The Exercises begin with a 'Foundation' which integrates people in a triangular relationship with

God and other creatures: 'the other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created.' John English offers a timely rephrase of these words for our present context in which we realize, more vividly than Ignatius' generation, that the earth community is not a vertical hierarchy, but a community, under God, in which people are subordinate sovereigns among many brethren (Deut 17:15–20). 'Today we might wish to say, "The other things on the face of the earth are created as companions to assist us and all of the earth to attain the fullness of relationship with God."'¹⁶ So intimately are we related to our sister and brother creatures that we, as God's subordinate sovereigns, are also for *them* and their service. At times we are privileged to articulate their praise in our human voices. Michael Ivens writes, 'The idea of creatures as "helps to an end" can however convey a misleadingly utilitarian impression, and it must not be understood as denying the value of things in themselves.'¹⁷

After the 'Foundation' we meditate imaginatively on the history of sin, which skews the triangular relationship of God, God's human creatures, and the rest of the earth community. In the presence of our crucified Saviour, we ask ourselves, 'what I have done for Christ, what I am doing for Christ, what I ought to do for Christ'. This question implies responsibilities for the other animals with whom we share this planet, and for whose welfare we are responsible. There follows, in the first week of the Exercises, a meditation on our own 'sin history', which concludes with an imaginative exclamation of St Ignatius, wondering 'that the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the elements, the fruits of the earth, the birds, the fishes, and the animals, and the earth, how it is it has not opened to swallow me up, creating new hells that I might suffer in them for ever.' There is contemporary relevance in this vivid colloquy. Despite our earth abuse, our exploitation of fellow sensate beings, and our affliction of the climate, the earth community, at least until now, continues to sustain us. This colloquy, and the whole parade of sin in the First Week of the Exercises, can alert us to the horror of earth and animal abuse. To abuse creation, to pollute and destroy with over-construction, to afflict the climate through unsustainable motor and air transport, is the definitively defiant sin, the sin against the Holy Spirit, the rejection of God in God's creatures.

Imaginative contemplation

In a central meditation, the Kingdom, we are advised to deploy our *imagination*, as we interiorly visualize *the place* on this earth where

Jesus, our King and Lord, lived with the earth community of Palestine. This material world, of soil, plants and animals, is the home where Our Creator and Saviour lived on this earth, reconciling all earth creatures to himself. Like the synoptics, the mediaeval glaziers, the early Franciscans, and the imaginative ascetical tradition, the Exercises include animals in the Christmas story. Indeed, Ignatius, in a Nativity prelude, includes the familiar ox and ass on the trip to David's city, even before placing us at the Lucan manger (*phatne*) with its inclusive connotations of domestic animals (Lk 2:8–20; Isai 1:3). A contemplation of the star and Magi evokes recollections of Balaam's donkey, more gentle and wise than her human owner (Mt 2:1–12; Num 22:21–35). The flight into Egypt also includes the faithful family donkey (Mt 2:134; Ex 4.20).

The Exercises include imaginative contemplations on the life, passion, death and triumph of Jesus. Many of the animal species, large and very small, with whom Jesus lived in the hills and at the lake, in short stays in the wilderness, and in Jerusalem, are now extinct or very scarce. The Jordan rift where Jesus lived with wild animals, and where he was baptized (Mk 1:13), is now exploited, tainted and drained by industry and agribusiness.¹⁸ Yet, even now, along the bank where 'kingfishers catch fire', there remains 'the dearest freshness, deep down things'. Beyond the river, in the Judaeian wilderness, I have watched a diversity of birds, resident and migratory, whose forebears Jesus probably knew in his retreats in the wilderness. In his ministry, Jesus lived and preached in settlements amid the green and brown hills, fields and valleys, surrounded by wildlife, crowds, disciples and adversaries. Some of the wildlife appear in his remembered parables. Near the end of his life on earth, we can imagine Jesus in the olive ecosystem of the Mount where he adjourned often, especially at evening, with his disciples (Jn 18:2). In his final trip to Jerusalem, Jesus did not walk alone. He was accompanied by a donkey, present with him at the end, as a donkey had been at the beginning. In the words of Chesterton's poem:

Fools! for I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

The Exercises conclude with a final 'Contemplation for Love', in which we rejoice in God's myriad gifts, including the animals who surround us. 'See how God dwells in creatures: in the elements giving

being; in the plants giving growth; in the animals giving sensation; and in humankind granting the gift of understanding.' God dwells within creatures, like a worker investing himself in his work. In a duality of reverence for God's own Self and for God's creatures, we worship our Creator, present and self-giving, in and through God's creatures. 'When we seal our mouths with the sign of the cross, it means that in Jesus, our Saviour and Lord, there dwells the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one single God, one Creator and Lord.'¹⁹ In a letter to Francis Borgia, Ignatius describes the coinherence of Jesus, our creator and Lord, with God's creatures,

When persons go out of themselves and enter into their Creator and Lord, they enjoy continuing instruction, attention and consolation; they are aware how the fullness of our eternal God dwells in all created things, giving them being and keeping them in existence with his infinite being and presence.²⁰

Jesus present in God's creatures

We enjoy the presence of contemporary ascetics in our midst. Our ascetics include lay brothers and sisters, parents, single people and children, many of whom are almost silent. These people, our neighbours and fellow Christians, find Jesus, our Creator and Lord, present in God's creatures. Children, indeed all of us, can learn from parents and teachers who find God in all things great and small. We learn from the artists and craftsmen, who, through their works in our churches and shrines, imaginatively join animals to ourselves as we worship our Creator. We learn from, and can support, conservationists working devotedly with wildlife groups. We can support campaigners, some of them ordained ministers, who align themselves with protesters at dangerous experiments with our food and wildlife. These prophetic people are within our present living tradition. They are with us now. We honour and learn from them. We also learn from the saints who loved animals, ascetics who, even while living within a hierarchic cosmology, nevertheless revered and found God in less articulate creatures.

Within the communion of saints, present and past, we contemplate Jesus with the wild animals of the wilderness, and with the wildlife of Galilee and Judaea. We pray with animals, visible in their images, in a country church, a cathedral, a shrine. We can also pray with animals in an organic garden, a woodland, near water, or in an urban park,

sometimes with our pets in our arms. Animals were the contemporaries of Jesus when he prayed to God as Father, in the wilderness, on the hills, and by the lake, and in the famous olive garden. Jesus at prayer with the animals recalls the way the first Isaiah imagined the peaceable kingdom. Our Creator and Lord brings more than piecemeal peace. When we pray in communion with our animal neighbours, we are parables of the peaceable kingdom.

Edward P. Echlin is author of *Earth spirituality, Jesus at the centre* (New Alresford, 1999), and Honorary Research Fellow, University College of Trinity & All Saints, Leeds. He lectured in ecclesiology at John Carroll University, Ushaw College and Lincoln Theological College. He currently writes and lectures widely on Christian theology and spirituality and the environment.

NOTES

- 1 Jared Diamond, *The rise and fall of the third chimpanzee* (London, 1991), p 19; see Jane Goodall, *Reason for hope: a spiritual journey* (London, 1999), pp 125–149.
- 2 John Seymour, *The ultimate heresy* (Hartland, 1989), p 123.
- 3 In Robert Murray, *The cosmic covenant* (London, 1992), pp 108, 200.
- 4 In Edward P. Echlin, *Earth spirituality, Jesus at the centre* (New Alresford, 1999), p 60.
- 5 Michael Polanyi, *Personal knowledge: towards a post-critical philosophy* (New York, 1964), p 115.
- 6 For the creche at Greccio, see J. R. H. Moorman, *St Francis of Assisi* (London, 1950), p 110.
- 7 R. E. Brown, at a time of progress myth triumphalism, leaves this possibility open. See an introduction to *New Testament christology* (London, 1994), pp 236–237.
- 8 Sarojini Henry, 'Earth in her rich attire: spirituality of trees' *Bangalore Theological Forum* vol xxxii, no-1 (June 2000), p 117.
- 9 St John Chrysostom, 'Homily 9', in R. C. Hill (ed & trans), *St John Chrysostom: homilies on Genesis 2:6–8* (Washington, 1986), p 120.
- 10 In Edward P. Echlin, *The Christian green heritage* (Bramcote, 1989), p 8.
- 11 Athanasius, 'The life of St Antony' in Robert Meyer (ed and trans), *Athanasius: the life of St Antony* (London, 1950), p 63.
- 12 Helen Waddell, *Beasts and saints* (London, 1934), p 136.
- 13 Bede, 'Life of Cuthbert', in J. R. Webb (ed and trans), *Lives of the saints* (Harmondsworth, 1965), p 97.
- 14 Bertram Colgrave (ed and trans), *Felix's life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge, 1985), p 123.
- 15 Thomas of Celano, 'The first life of St Francis', in Marion A. Habig (ed) *St Francis of Assisi, writings and early biographies, English omnibus for the life of St Francis* (Quincy, 1991), p 278.
- 16 'We live in a broken world', in Michael Czerney (ed), *Reflections on ecology* (Rome 1999), p 22.
- 17 Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster, 1998), p 30.
- 18 Sam Giley, 'Valley of death', *The Times* (4 July 2000), pp 3–4.
- 19 In Hugo Rahner, *Ignatius the theologian* (London, 1990), p 31.
- 20 'Epistolae et Instructiones S Ignatii', 12 vols, *MHSJ* vol 12 (Madrid, 1903, 1911), p 667.