

# Jesus, the Fossil Record, and All Things

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As the ecological crisis, fuelled by widespread reality avoidance, deepens, so, fitfully and hesitantly, does the religious response. “Curiously, scientific analysis points toward the need for a quasi-religious transformation of contemporary culture. Whether such a transformation can be achieved in time is problematic, to say the least”, writes Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich.<sup>1</sup> Recent Christian reflection has concentrated on the human presence, the place and responsibility, within creation, of people under God. Fruitful discussion continues about metaphors and models for human dominion, such as stewardship, sacral kingship, co-worker, and co-operative letting be.<sup>2</sup>

Other distinctively Christian questions are also being asked — and convincing answers demanded — that go right to the heart of the Christian religion, questions about Christ and the whole scientifically unfolding reality of life through geological history. We now realize that the cosmos is more immense than our ancestors in the faith imagined; and that our own species, redeemed in Christ and the conscious edge of evolution, is both more fragile and more vulnerable and, simultaneously, more damaging a presence within global and local ecosystems than we like to acknowledge. We are aware that there have been mass extinction events taking out whole ecosystems; in particular we are aware of the dinosaurs. Extinction events take their toll, especially through climate change and habitat loss, over millenia, even millions of years. We may be in such an extinction event in this our time, particularly in the decimation of flora and fauna including numerous insect species in the rainforests of the humid tropics.<sup>3</sup>

Our experience recalls the death experience of the American anthropologist Margaret Mead when her nurse confirmed that she was dying. “It happens to everyone, my dear”, the nurse said. “Yes”, replied Mead summoning a final burst of her wonted energy, “but *this* is different.” Our own destruction of habitats and concomitant extinction of biodiversity, in what Nicholas Lash describes as “the rape of non-renewable resources for short term gain” in a profit-driven culture, this loss of biodiversity is different *because it is ours*. It is also different

because as Christians, followers of Jesus the model shepherd, we may be required to lay down our lives for the other creatures who are our sheep. (Jn. 10:11, 15; Ps. 72: 3, 16)

## Large Ecological Questions

In 1919 the French philosopher Maurice Blondel described a still outstanding challenge to Christian theology and practice which becomes more demanding as our knowledge of the universe and our own unsustainable impact within it increases.

Our world has expanded through the social and natural sciences. One cannot remain true to Catholicism and be content with a mediocre explanation, a limited outlook which represents Christ as an accident of history, isolating Him in the Cosmos as if He were an episode without proper time and place. One cannot represent Him as an intruder, an alien in the crushing and hostile immensity of the universe.<sup>4</sup>

Blondel's concern remains our concern. If we delimit our Christology, spirituality and catechesis to salvation history we omit the presence of the pre-existent Jesus from those aeons which preceded human life on earth. If we confine Him to Judaeo-Christian history we omit the presence of Jesus, risen from the dead and filling all things, from the future of the universe when there may no longer be a major human presence on earth. We may ask ourselves what God's pre-existent Word, which appeared in Jesus, has to do with the primeval flaring forth when the universe began, with the whole 15-billion-year unfolding of the universe, with the three and a half billion years of life on our planet and with the last 600 million years of teeming biodiversity. If Jesus is also Lord of species which no longer exist, we may ask what Jesus has to do with extinction, with the species which left traces in the fossil record but are now no more. God's wisdom, which appeared in Jesus, was present and provident when small mammals survived the Cretaceous-Tertiary extinction that took out the dinosaurs and ammonites. That extinction event inaugurated our own cenozoic age, the most biodiverse period in earth history, which includes the presence and impact of our own species. During this cenozoic age, salvation history with "the scandal of particularity" in Palestine has happened. We cannot confine the plenitude of Jesus to this period of history as if He had no redemptive effect on past and future, and on the extinction event in which we now live. We may — and should — consider in our theology, spirituality and preaching our response to human-induced climate change, habitat loss and daily extinction of insect species. May we call ourselves authentic

followers of Jesus if we are indifferent to the destruction by an economocentric culture of the earth community created and redeemed in Him?

These are some of the large questions people, including scientists and environmentalists, ask of Christ, of Christianity, and of Christians. They are, fundamentally, questions about the inclusiveness of Jesus within and beyond this universe. They are questions which the Christian religion, if it is to have more than a marginal future, cannot avoid much longer. They are questions about Christian faith *in practice*. For we only grasp the inclusive significance of the Incarnation when we, as Christians, including our media and aid agencies, commit ourselves in practice to the ecology of Jesus — when we, as Christians, become everywhere on earth a healing and sustainable presence within our own bioregion on this small planet.

An ecological Christology will flow from the contemplation and study by believers of our whole Christian reality, of the bible, and of the liturgy, life and worship of the Church, including what Michael Polanyi calls the “vast fund of subsidiarily known connotations” about Jesus and ecology which we know not explicitly but tacitly. We know more about Jesus than we can say; and what we cannot say is often more important than what we can say. We discover — and rediscover — ecological clues and connotations about Jesus when we contemplate and study Him in his earthly life *and* as risen and exalted filling His universe today; and when, in solidarity with Him who is “The Way” and with other believers, we heal and renew the earth and live sustainably as His followers. In the remainder of this paper I propose, for the contemplation and study of believers, some dimensions of the mystery of Jesus in our universe.

### **The Jordan Afire**

Water is an archetypal symbol. For the Chinese, water is the blood of the world. For Hindus, the Ganges is a sacred river. Islam celebrates water in glistening gardens and rainbow fountains. For the Jews, the land is good because it is “a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills.” (Dt. 8:7) For Christians, the whole global hydrology is sacred, all the waters of the world are afire, because Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. “Water was the beginning of the world”, said Cyril of Jerusalem, “the Jordan the beginning of the good news.” “He submitted to baptism so that He might sanctify water”, wrote Ignatius of Antioch. “The Spirit descends upon the waters sanctifying them”, adds Tertullian. The Spirit’s descent at Christ’s baptism, symbolised by breathing upon the baptized at our baptismal liturgies, with its connotations of anointing for royal kingship, is rich with

ecological symbolism. People baptised into Christ are a royal priesthood, mediators between earth and heaven, shepherds leading other creatures in harmonious praise of God. (Ps. 96:11–13)

Christ's baptism by John in the Jordan should be restored and celebrated in western liturgies, sensitizing Christians to the preciousness of water. We can learn from the Orthodox churches which celebrate Christ's baptism in holistic Epiphany liturgies, "Today earth and sea share the joy of the world, and the world is filled with gladness . . . The Jordan turned back and the mountains skipped, looking upon God in the flesh; and the clouds gave voice."

### **The Good Land**

At the borders of the promised land, the bioregion God promised to the Jews as their own habitat, Moses sent spies to reconnoitre the terrain of God's promise. The spies, save only Caleb and Joshua, disparaged the land, yearning for the lights of distant cities. "Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" they murmured. (Nm. 14:3) Mighty Moses himself doubted God's promised providence of water from a parched rock. As a result of these ecological sins, all the adult Jews died in the alien dust save only Caleb and Joshua the Son of Nun. (Nm. 14: 22–24) Christ in the desert reversed Jewish hubris, repelling temptations with texts from the Jewish scriptures recalling the famous deuteronomic description of the "good land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey." (Dt. 8:8)

Jesus, according to Luke, returned to His boyhood home at Nazareth, "his own country", early in his ministry. He visited the synagogue and chose for His own reading a programmatic text from Isaiah proclaiming liberation in categories of Jewish jubilee.<sup>5</sup> Jubilee acknowledges God's ultimate dominion, His ownership of all things within the soil community. "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me." (Lv. 25:23) Sabbath and Jubilee remission of debts, the resting of the soil with all its creatures, sharing with strangers and even wild beasts, were and are "moments when God's ownership of the land is acknowledged and celebrated."<sup>6</sup> Jesus grew up and worshipped within a culture in which the human presence, at least in the ideal, was understood as neither domination nor ownership of other creatures but co-operative letting be, sacral kingship under God.

Jesus learned about biodiversity, the fields, animals, and plants of His bioregion, and the nurture of food for one's extended family, in the chalky fields blessed with abundant springs above the Esdraelon plain at Nazareth. As the eldest son, it is probable that He grew fruit and

vegetables, learning husbandry from His father, in a family field on the village outskirts.<sup>7</sup> Indeed a variety of insects, plants and top fruit, including olives, figs, pomegranates, dates, vines and almonds, still flourish in crowded Nazareth today. At Nazareth, Jesus learned about fauna species nurtured by the same soil fertility in the same hill country which nurtured Himself and His family.

### **The Inclusive Jesus**

One should beware of suspecting that Jesus' pervasive allusions to rural life, to biodiversity and its nurture, are due to a deprived village background away from urban life; and that Paul and later urban Christians did theology in a more sophisticated and street-wise manner preparing the way for enlightened 20th-century critical scholarship. In fact, the Incarnation itself and Jesus' entire mission and ministry are inclusive. God's kingdom, now and in the future, includes this planet. Jesus' preaching, His parables, metaphors and word pictures are within the good news; the medium is also the message.

And the medium and message are inclusive and holistic. An ox or ass or sheep may be rescued even on a sabbath. A good (or "model") shepherd knows his sheep and is prepared to die for them. (Jn. 10:11) God provides for creatures of the air and for spring wildflowers. Foxes have dens, birds nests, serpents are wise, the doves of Palestine gentle. The ultimate criterion of a person's worth is how he shares the earth's creatures with people in need. (Mt. 25:31f) Jesus' repudiation of exclusiveness was a principal cause of His execution by the Jerusalem establishment. (Lk. 4:24–28)<sup>8</sup> With today's increasing awareness of the interdependence of people with the whole carrying capacity of ecosystems, it is difficult to maintain that Christians can genuinely love human neighbours while unsustainably damaging other creatures. The Christian community deserves a social ethics which includes responsibility for the welfare of ecosystems. Indeed we need to widen our Christian community to include the entire soil community.

Jesus' miracles, like His preaching, have holistic connotations. When people are alienated from God they are divided from other people, from their own bodies, from animals and plants, from the whole soil community. Jesus' miracles signify liberation from bondage to evil and everlasting death. They are signs that God's kingdom comprehends a visible and physical dimension. The miracles, writes Walter Kasper, "are expressions of the physical and visible dimension of the kingdom of God. They are guarantees of man's hope for the liberation of himself and his world from its bondage to decay."<sup>9</sup>

## The Hour

In the climactic “hour” of His life, Jesus witnessed to the “visible dimension of the kingdom” in a final meal with His disciples, sharing wine and food from the Judean, indeed Jerusalem, bioregion. His suffering included His agony on the mountain under the olive trees where, in his Jerusalem days, “He had rested often.” (Lk 22:39; Jn 8:1) Significantly, John’s gospel uses the Greek word *keipos*, meaning garden, including plants and trees, for the place where Jesus was arrested. John adds “He often went there with his disciples”. (Jn. 18:1–2) Mark and Matthew say He was arrested at a place called Gethsemane, a word connoting olives. (Mk. 14:32; Mt. 26:36) After the Last Supper, He went there, said Luke, “as was His custom”. (Lk. 22:39)

A traditional olive plantation, with large and well-spaced trees, some of which still exist in Palestine including, significantly, Mount Hermon and the Mount of Olives itself, is an indefinitely renewable soil community. All things in an olive field are connected, renewable, interdependent, interrelated.<sup>10</sup> A carefully nurtured olive plantation, including animals and fowl, fruit and vegetables and bees, can feed humans and other creatures, in partial self-sufficiency, within a local biosystem indefinitely. The point I am making is that more than people were included in Jesus’ final hour of suffering. Redemption includes green gardens. The blood and perspiration shed in Gethsemane’s soil remain within our global ecosystem reconciling all things today.

At His death on Calvary, rich in symbolism of new creation, liquids flowed from Jesus’ body into the earth, redeeming our whole soil community “not with the water only, but with the water and the blood.” (1 Jn. 5:6; Jn 19:34) When Jesus’s broken body was poured out upon the earth he was in his humanity what as God’s Word he had been from “the beginning”, the immanent presence and power of God within His creation. Significantly, John again uses the word *keipos*, meaning garden, for the place where Jesus was buried; and Magdala mistakes the risen Jesus for the *keipouros*, or gardener, the only time the word is used in the bible. (Jn 20:15) The presence of the “woman” with Jesus, the new Adam, or gardener, in the garden, is evocative of new creation. (Gen. 2:15; 3:15) The risen Jesus, the new Adam, is a microcosm of the transformed universe, an initial budding forth of the transfiguration of all things from the primeval flaring forth throughout the whole geological history of our planet with its layered fossil record. All and every creature, past, present, and to be, in Jesus risen is reconciled to God. “In Him the whole dead past becomes alive again,” wrote F.J. Hort, “it is part of His body and His life flows through every part.”

## The Pleromatic Jesus

An ecological Christology contemplates and studies the historical Jesus, as we can recover Him from the early witnesses, and the risen Christ who fills the universe. The majestic “In the beginning” in John’s prologue refers not to quantity of time but to Jesus’ presence with His Father in a qualitative sense at and even before the beginning of creation. As pre-existent Wisdom, Jesus was and is within the sphere of God. (Jn 1:1; 17:5, 24)<sup>11</sup> God’s Word was with God who breathed his Spirit over the primordial water; and God’s Word was present in Jesus of Nazareth in the new beginning at the Jordan. At the Jordan a new creation happened: God’s Spirit again moved over the water filling the universe.

Jesus in His Spirit fills all things; He is everywhere immanent, reconciling our earth both in expansion and in extinctions. Because He is present in the waters, Christians can Jordanize all the waters of the world. Because He is present in the land, in unsown wilderness and in lush biodiversity, Christians can renew the whole soil community. Christians testify in faith and hope and practice to the reconciling power of Jesus everywhere, at all times, and in all things. St Paul, the first Christian writer, borrowed and adapted a word used in Gnosticism, in Stoicism, and in hellenistic Judaism, *pleroma*, to express the immensity, the filling presence of Jesus *in all things*, past and present, in height and depth and future. “He who descended is He who also ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.” (Eph. 4:10)<sup>12</sup>

We know more today than did our ancestors in the faith about climate change, habitat loss, background and mass extinctions, and the extent and power of our own species.<sup>13</sup> We are asking questions about Jesus and ecology that they never asked. Yet there is a plenitude in the bible, and in the liturgy, life and worship, of the Church, which witnesses to the fullness of Jesus in all things. The Church’s faith in the fullness of Jesus in his creation flows into *the practice* of Christians who, in Christ, care about the earth. The wealth within our tradition, says Vatican II, “flows into the practice and life of the believing and praying Church.” (DV 8) By contemplation and study, with wonder, of our whole tradition we will find clues, subsidiarily known connotations, which in a gradual gradient of discovery will nurture hope for the reconciliation of our planet in Jesus. God’s earth is good. God does not want his good earth destroyed. God wants His earth reconciled and transfigured in Jesus — but not destroyed. The whole creation is liberated from bondage in Jesus, “not with the water only, but with the water and the blood.” In the words of Vatican II, “as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.” (DV 8)



## Conclusion

The ecological crisis uncovers what Pope John Paul II in 1993 described as “the most dangerous crisis which can afflict man: the confusion between good and evil.” (VS 93) Can we love God’s gift of salvation but not his gift of creation? Can we sin against people but not their support systems? Can we call growth in the human economic product good while diminishing the earth’s economic product? Can we call *unsustainable* procreation, especially when that procreation takes place outside of stable parental relationships, good when the blessing to increase and multiply and fill the land is fulfilled and accomplished? Is industrialism good when industrial culture unsustainably exploits God’s earth?

Because of the crisis of confusion between good and evil, as reflected in questions such as these, scientists ask for “a quasi-religious transformation of contemporary culture”. Christianity proclaims Jesus of Nazareth in His fullness, the God of hope immanent in His creation. At this time of confusion — and death — Jesus is, for Christians, the way to truth and life. The whole universe from the primeval flaring forth to the present diminution is contained and transfigured in Him. For Christians who live sustainably and, in their practice as believers, renew the earth, there is every reason to hope because the Risen Jesus fills the whole of geological history — and the future — in all its parts both in expansions and in diminutions.

- 1 Paul Ehrlich, “The Loss of Diversity: Causes and Consequences”, in *Biodiversity*, E.O. Wilson, ed., National Academy Press, Washington, 1988, p. 26.
- 2 Cf. for example Robert Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant: Biblical Themes on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation*, Sheed & Ward, London, 1992, esp. pp. 161–175; and Paulos Mar Gregorios, *The Human Presence*, Amity House, N.Y., 1987, esp. pp. 64–65.
- 3 Steven M. Stanley, *Extinction*, Scientific American Books, N.Y., 1988, pp. 1–23.
- 4 ‘Maurice Blondel’s First Paper to Auguste Valensin’, in *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin - Maurice Blondel Correspondence*, Herder & Herder, N.Y., 1967, p. 23.
- 5 R.B. Sloan, Jr., *The Favourable Year of the Lord, A Study of Jubilee Theology in the Gospel of Luke*, Schola Press, Austin, 1977, p. 73–83.
- 6 James Crampsey SJ, “Look at the Birds of the Air . . .” *The Way*, Volume 31, No. 4, October 1991, p. 292.
- 7 John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Doubleday, N.Y., 1991, pp. 276–277.
- 8 Donald Senior, *Jesus. A Gospel Portrait*, rev. ed., Paulist, N.Y., 1992, p. 119.
- 9 Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, Burns & Oates, London, 1977, p. 95.
- 10 Edward P. Echlin, “‘Christ the Olive’ in the Decisive Decade”, *The Month*, July 1992, pp. 288–290.
- 11 R.A. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, 1–XII*, The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, N.Y., 1966, p. 15.
- 12 Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Ephesians: A Commentary*, H. Heron, trans, T. & T. Clarke, Edinburgh, 1991, pp. 81–84.
- 13 Niles Eldredge, *The Miner’s Canary: Unravelling the Mysteries of Extinction*, Virgin, London, 1993, esp. pp. 209–230.