

an ecological reading of the gospel of mark

The author explores Mark 1:29-39 in this second article in the series.

Elaine Wainwright

We began our ecological reading of Mark's gospel by focussing on the message of Jesus: repent. The call to *metanoia* invites us to change our perspective, our way of seeing. As ecological gospel readers we look "for and with" the **human characters**, the **holy characters and presence**, and the **habitat**. Further we explore these three in intimate relationship, and through a new lens of interconnectivity.

An important phrase at the beginning of Mark is "the kingdom" — the *basileia* of God — the core of Jesus' teaching (1:15). For the Markan community, *basileia* would have evoked the oppressive Roman Empire with its power over land, its material or Earth resources, and its people. However in the gospel the image functions metaphorically as an alternative to Rome. *Basileia* is God's dream for the universe — for the Earth community in the universe and all the more-than-human making up the universe.

focus on habitat

By being attentive to habitat we will notice the locations named, such as the wilderness (1:4, 12), the Jordan River (1:5, 9), Galilee and its sea (1:14, 16), and one of its towns, Capernaum (1:21). They are not merely backdrop to the story but for the ecological reader they are encoded in the text in all their materiality (water, dry earth, built environment — stone and wood to name but some). They are the "stuff" of our lives, the "stuff" without which no gospel story could be told.

We are invited to engage with these and many other such material

elements in the gospel narrative and to allow such attentiveness to make us alert to the materiality of both the human and other-than-human that constitute our own lives and in which we seek to live the alternative vision of the *basileia* of God.

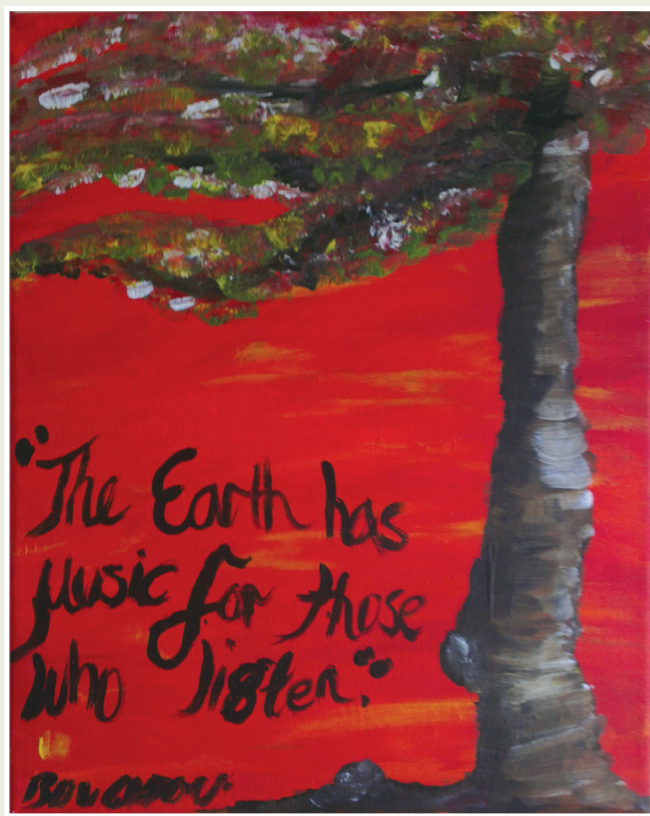
emphasis on "time" and "place"

Mark 1:29-39, the focal text for this month's reflection, turns the reader/listener to time, as the text opens with the favourite Markan phrase "and immediately". (It occurs 12 times within the opening chapter: 1:3, 10, 12, 18, 20, 21, 23, 28, 29, 30, 42, 43.) There is but the space of a breath between the close of the

previous narrative in 1:28 and the opening of 1:29. The reader then encounters the complexity of material spaces woven into this narrative: Jesus leaves the synagogue and the activity there and enters a house, a house whose materiality of wood and stone are intimately related to the human community. The house is identified as belonging to Simon and Andrew. James and John are among the human characters in this scene. The *basileia* ministry of Jesus takes place in time and space/place with all the materiality and interconnectivity of these.

dis-ease upsetting the space

But there is dis-location or dis-ease



Painting by Brittany Oughton, Auckland

in this space. We read that Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever. In the ancient Hippocratic medicine of the first century world, fever was seen as the cause of many illnesses, rendering the materiality of the human body out of order. The body of the woman and also the social structure of the household with its gendered roles characteristic of first century Palestine, are disrupted by the illness. When Jesus is told about this disruption to body and society, he reaches out and takes her by the hand. The human flesh of Jesus touches that of the woman and the fever leaves her. Both the healer and the healed touch and are touched in the mutuality of flesh meeting. This is a characteristic of the healing that shapes Jesus' proclamation of God's transformative dream.

restored to ministry

The final phase of this short healing narrative encodes in the text the complexity of the social relations in the household. Many interpreters will read, "and she served/was serving him" as a restoration of not only the body of the healed woman but also the gendered structure of the society — the woman takes up her household tasks. The verb "to serve" is *diēkonei* and it is written in the imperfect [she was serving them] indicating that this restoration began in the past following her healing and that it continues on into present and possible future. This verb is used to describe Jesus' own ministry (10:45). It is also used to describe the ministry of the women of Galilee who followed Jesus (according to the text as "disciples" 15:41). Restoration of bodies, social relationships and structures establishes the new *basileia* that Jesus proclaims.

sickness and demon possession

Time continues to characterise Jesus' *basileia* ministry — the evening of the very same day the people bring "all" who were sick or possessed with demons.



The Healing of Peter's Mother-in-law, by James Tissot [Brooklyn Museum]

Both sickness and demon possession are seen within the worldview of the first century. Sickness manifests as dis-ease or a lack of right material relationships within the body. Demon possession shows as a lack of right relationships in the space between the human/sublunar realm of the cosmos and the superlunar realm of the heavens. This was the space inhabited by demonic powers in the Hellenistic world-view of the first century. Demons were considered "out of place" when they inhabited human persons or the sublunar realm.

A very different cosmic worldview as well as health-care system inform us today and the gospel can invite us to explore both of these more deeply as they shape our reading of the gospel. The ecological reader encounters restoration of both the materiality of human bodies and the sociality of human relationships as signs of the new *basileia* dream for Earth and Cosmos.

Verse 35 may have been read traditionally through the interpretive lens of the holy — Jesus, who is named "son of God", goes off in the early morning to pray, to maintain his relationship with the Holy One. The attentive ecological reader will note, however, that the Markan narrator

continues to locate each new story in time — and here the reference is extended. Not only does the narrator tell us that it is "in the morning" but amplifies this with the phrase "a great while before day". As well as in time, the scene is also explicitly located in place — "a lonely place". The shortest phrase in the sentence is the last — "there he prayed". Habitat, human and holy are engaged in right relationship.

As this section of Mark's opening chapter draws to a close, Jesus is presented as going throughout all Galilee. This locates him in place both generally and specifically — he is preaching in synagogues. Both the material and social realities continue to be evoked in Mark as Jesus "is casting out demons".

In the coming month perhaps as we read this gospel we could give greater attention to the relationships of time, place, the holy, the human and social interactions in the stories. ■

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