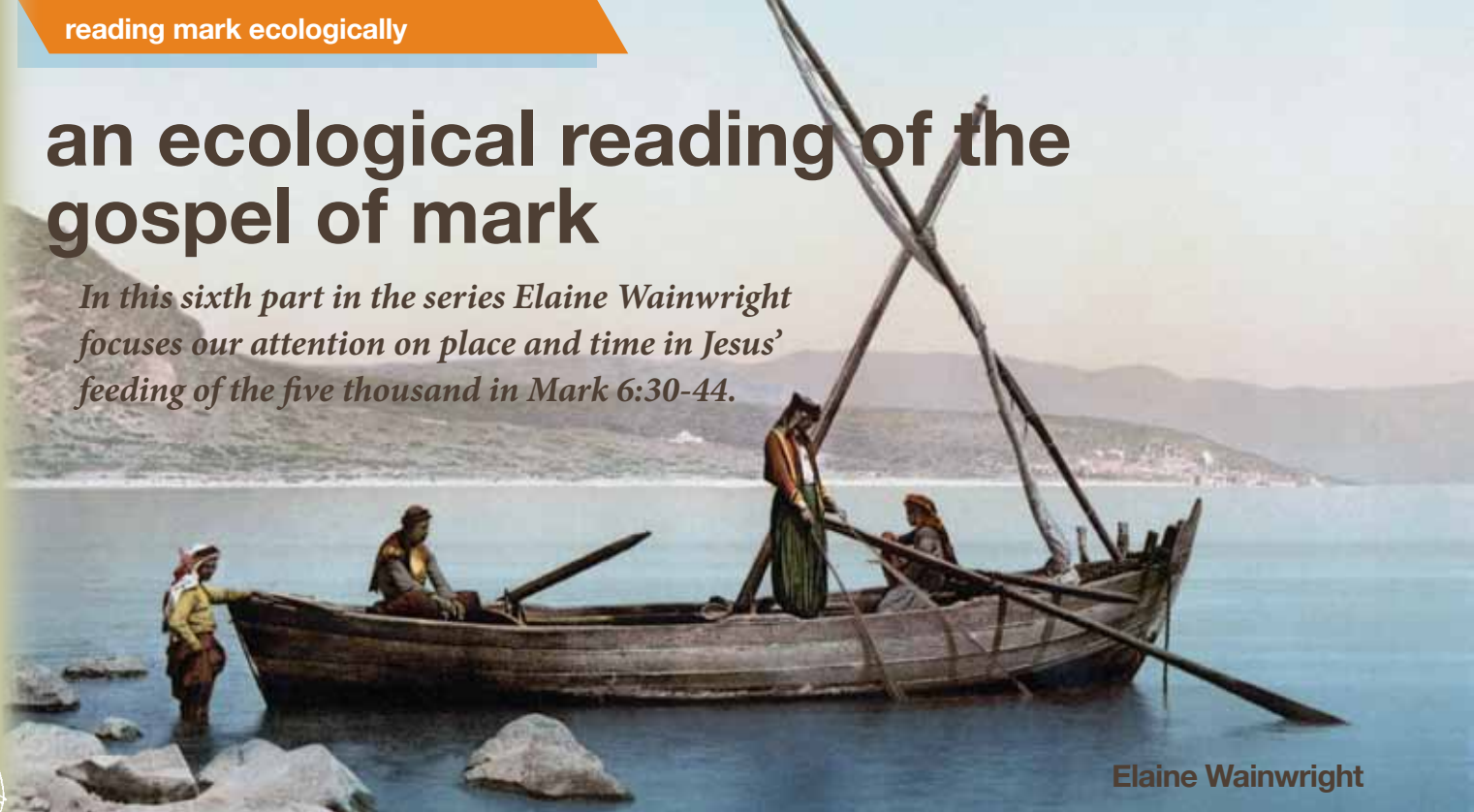


an ecological reading of the gospel of mark

In this sixth part in the series Elaine Wainwright focuses our attention on place and time in Jesus' feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6:30-44.



Elaine Wainwright

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 31 He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. 32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. 33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 34 As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and

he began to teach them many things. 35 When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; 36 send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." 37 But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" 38 And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." 39 Then

he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. 40 So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. 41 Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. 42 And all ate and were filled; 43 and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. 44 Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

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People "in place" may be an appropriate way for an ecological reader to characterise not only the opening verses of Mark 6:30-44, but the entire passage. Place will, therefore, be a significant focus in an ecological reading of this text familiarly called "the feeding of the five thousand". Interwoven into the fabric of this well-known narrative is a range of other material features that can be overlooked easily.

place and time

The place encoded in this Markan text is a lonely or deserted place (an *erēmos*), sometimes translated as desert, into which Jesus invites his disciples. He does this so that he can hear them tell about their ministry, their anointing of

bodies with oil and their healing them (Mk 6:13). Jesus also wants them to rest, to attend to their own bodies after the time of carrying out the mission to which he has sent them.

Knowledge of first century Galilee, especially the area around the lake, coupled with the reference in the text to "many coming and going", suggests that the place is somewhere apart from the crowds among whom the disciples have been ministering. Time, as well as place, characterises an ecological reading of this text, in particular the right time for ministry and the right time for going apart to a deserted place.

However the crowds do not recognise that Jesus and the disciples need to withdraw. Rather they run ahead to the place so that they are in the *erēmos*

when Jesus and the disciples arrive. Jesus' bodily senses are alert. He "sees" the crowd — but not just as a seeing with the eyes. The crowd draws forth a response from Jesus' body as the use of the verb *splagchnizein* — have compassion (Mk 6:34) indicates. He is moved in the depths of his being, his entrails, his gut. Sallie McFague, an American theologian, raises the question as to whether that compassion might also be extended to place (in this instance, the *erēmos*), to the material world, which means seeing place and people with a "loving" rather than an "arrogant" eye — with the "eye of the ecological self".

different scenario

At the end of Jesus' day of teaching the response of the "disciples" to both place

and people seems to be informed by an arrogant rather than an ecological eye. They note that the place is deserted, the time is late and they want the crowd dispersed. They have an eye for commodity exchange (buying and selling) in an imperial economy as a way of feeding hungry communities. They propose to send the people into the villages to “buy food for themselves”.

Jesus proposes a different scenario, that of hospitality or of gift-giving — “you give them something to eat” (Mk 6:37) — a sharing of material resources. Anne Primevesi, an Irish ecological theologian, describes such a “gift giving” as “a conscious acceptance of and commitment to the fact that our lives depend on indivisible benefits, on our being given what we need to sustain life whether or not we can or do pay for it.”

Jesus initiates such a gift event when he garners from among the gathered crowd the five loaves and two fish, the staple food of people whose lives are dependent on their environment — the nearby lake and the rich agricultural regions around the lake. These five

loaves and two fish are freely given over into the hands of Jesus by those who had brought them, implicating themselves and their food in what is to take place. Jesus also re-engages the disciples, who had “distanced” themselves from the crowd, asking them to seat the crowds in groups, or what we might call “circles of compassion”, “circles of hospitality” in which food is to be shared.

Readers are drawn into the materiality of the scene. With 5000 men (the Matthean text extends the number — “not counting women and children”) seated around in groups, Jesus takes into his hands, he touches, the five loaves and two fish. He turns his eyes to the sky or heavens, he blesses then breaks the loaves to give to the disciples for the crowds and he divides the fish among them all.

circles of compassion/ hospitality

There is no language of multiplication, only circles of compassion/hospitality among whom blessed bread and fish are distributed in abundance.

Twelve baskets of *klasmata* or crumbs are gathered after all were satisfied — nothing is wasted.

It was in the giving of the loaves to be blessed, broken and then in their being given to disciples and crowds, that hunger is satisfied. Wendell Berry, an American writer and environmental activist, extends this interconnectivity further when he says that “eaters ... must understand that eating takes place inescapably in the world, that it is inescapably an agricultural act, and how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used ... To eat responsibly is to understand and enact ... this complex relationship.” It is such reflections that might inform an ethical theology of food/eating as well as an ecological theologising of Eucharist which is so often associated with this narrative as well as its parallel account of the feeding of more than 4000 (Mk 8:1-9). ■

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Jesus feeding the crowd with fish and loaves, by Eric Feather www.ericfeather.com [Used with permission.]