

an ecological reading of the gospel of mark

In the eighth part in this series Elaine Wainwright reads Mark 10:17-30 pointing to the clues that draw the reader into the ecological world of radical relationships among the human, the holy and the habitat.

Elaine Wainwright

The Markan section that I've chosen to read ecologically this month is slightly longer than usual and so I invite you at the outset to read it from your *Bible*. As you do this, place the selected verses in the context of the whole of Mark 10. This will bring you into contact with the rich ecological texture of this segment of the gospel.

Woven into the ecological texture of this text are diverse material and social features that draw readers into the realm not only of the human and the holy but also of habitat. As you begin reading Mk 10:1, you encounter Jesus walking new ground — the region of Judea beyond (or on the eastern side of) the Jordan and in that place people (human bodies) are gathered in significant numbers. Jesus teaches the crowds as readers have come to expect. In Mark 10:13-16 though, readers encounter another feature of the ecological texture, namely human touch, indeed human embrace. The crowds bring children to Jesus so that he might touch them. While the disciples try to prevent this, Jesus gathers the children into his embrace, blessing them and laying hands on them. It is as if Jesus knew what contemporary philosophers and psychologists tell us, namely that in our reaching out and touching another (not just human but also other-than-human), we, in our turn are touched by the other. Jesus is touched by what is holy, what is of God in these children (Mk 10:14) and such encounter takes place in material human flesh.

on the move

As the focal section of Mark 10:17-30 opens, readers encounter Jesus “on the move” again — “setting out on his



journey” which is taking him toward Jerusalem. It is in such a familiar and material context that profound ethical questions arise. A young man approaches Jesus and asks what he must do to gain life without end (Mk 10:17). If we listen attentively to Jesus' reply, we note that the commandments cited by Jesus are rich in ecological texture in ways that we don't always expect of commandments. They call for right relationships lived out in material/human bodies (no murder, no adultery, no defrauding but honouring of father and mother Mk 10:19). If we listen more attentively, we will notice that these commandments entail not only human-human relationships, the lens through which we generally read the text, but also relationships with other-than-human elements that are encoded in the text. These include instruments of murder, money, as well as gifts and property that pass between parents

and children and among neighbours. The human and other-than-human are always inextricably bound up with one another and must be attended to in the ecological texture of the text as well as in the texture of our social lives.

do not steal

It is the commandment not to steal which seems to evoke the other-than-human most explicitly in this text. Before we turn to this, it is important to note that in its origins, this commandment referred to enslaving human persons. This meaning needs to be retained today in the face of widespread human trafficking in which young women and men and even children are stolen from families and birth places and sold into multiple forms of slavery in foreign lands. These are among the “crucified poor” that Pope Francis speaks of in *Laudato Si'* and he links their pain with that of

a “wounded world” (*LS*, par 241). The violence inflicted on their bodies is also being inflicted on so many Earth elements as this international endemic grows.

The wounded world is evident in the breakdown of right and just distribution of the material resources of a region, a country, a community and even an individual. These resources will be water in many areas, food in others, or materials for shelter in others. All this is evoked by the commandment not to steal. It informs the final challenge Jesus offers the young man who believes that he has kept all the commandments, living in right relation with human and other-than-human. He is invited by Jesus, who looks on him with love, to go and to sell all “he has”. The invitation to the young man to give over property and possessions to be in right relationships with/in the more-than-human encompassing reality (sky/heavens, Mk 10:21) is an invitation to all readers. This is not a negation of what is material, but rather a recognition that right relationships with the material will vary considerably across responses to Jesus. This young man sought more than the doing of the commandments as they served the maintaining of right relationships. Having requested an answer to his question to Jesus, he finds that he cannot take on the radical re-aligning of resources, the giving over of what he has to the poor, to which Jesus invites him. He goes away sorrowful — for he had many possessions (Mk 10:22).

radical relationship

This is a poignant story — the loving gaze of Jesus on the young man bursting with enthusiasm for the right ordering that his sacred tradition called forth from him; and the “shock” and the sorrow/grieving of the young man who cannot enter into the radical relationship with all that is material, to which Jesus invites him. The “wounded world” that Pope Francis has brought before our



eyes in *Laudato Si'* cries out for right relationships between the other-than-human and the human. It calls for the radical responses that Jesus asks of the young man and from his disciples: go sell what you own and give to the “crucified poor” (Mk 10:21); for it is hard for those with many resources/possessions to enter into the right ordering that is of God (Mk 10:23-24). Jesus uses what we might call a carnivalesque image — an image that upturns our world views — to engage with the difficulty of what Jesus asks: he evokes a camel, a tall, towering animal being threaded through the eye of a needle! This is not just difficult but wildly impossible and yet such a radical re-ordering of our relationships is possible “for God”. The right relationship between habitat, human and holy is evoked and it can enable us to address the intimate

intersection today of the “wounded world” and the “crucified poor”.

Reading this section of the Markan gospel ecologically has brought to light the radical nature of the call to be disciples of Jesus, the crucified poor one who is at this point in the Markan narrative “walking ahead of them” on the “road going up to Jerusalem” (Mk 10:32-34). Those who would accompany him on this way will leave family and fields in order to attend to the “crucified poor” and the “wounded world” (MK 10:28-30).

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Artwork opposite *Christ and the children* (1910) by Emil Nolde, and above *He went through the villages on the way to Jerusalem* by Jacque Joseph Tissot.

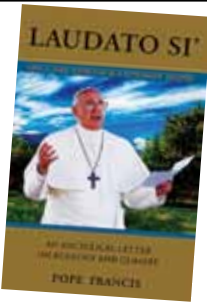
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