

# an ecological reading of the gospel of mark

We begin a year's journey of eleven articles reflecting with Elaine Wainwright on the gospel of Mark from an ecological perspective. As preparation for the series, read the gospel as a story - in one sitting if possible - to familiarise yourself with it again.

Elaine Wainwright

When you read Mark's gospel did you find your attention drawn to Jesus and the other human characters with whom Jesus interacts? And were you also attentive to God and the Divine presence functioning as a background character in the story? Most of us read and reflect on the gospels like that — attending to the human/divine presences.

However many voices in our world today are making us aware that our almost exclusive focus on the human community and its needs and desires is placing the material world, or 'creation', in jeopardy. Indeed quite recently Pope Francis voiced the cry: "If we destroy Creation, Creation will destroy us!" Not only the Pope but our planet and its other-than-human community is calling us to a change of mindset.

## new story of the universe

At the same time, a new story of the universe emerging from the work of cosmologists and other scientists, draws our attention to the more than 13–14 billion years of the universe's evolving. This awareness, in turn, challenges our anthropocentric or human-centred perspectives. In like manner ecological crises such as climate change, destruction of species, the violent fracking of Earth itself and many other events, are calling for a

*This first article offers a springboard expanding our reading to include more than the human and divine characters and voices in the gospel.*

shift in both perspective and ethic.

This is the context in our world today that is inviting us to read our world and to read our sacred story ecologically. Such an invitation is a call similar to that in the opening verses of the Markan gospel: repent (Mark 1:15). This is a call to metanoia, a call to change one's perspective, one's way of seeing. In relation to our reading of the gospel story, it is an invitation to read not only for the human and the holy but also for habitat. It invites us to be attentive to the complex web of the other-than-human which is interwoven with the human and the holy: place, space, together with all elements of the natural and the built environments. To read in this way could be called reading intertextually and contextually.

## read the whole text anew

In this monthly column I will read in some detail selected texts threaded through the Markan narrative. This

will be an invitation to you to read other surrounding texts from a similar perspective. The texts are chosen not because they lend themselves to an ecological reading. Rather they represent different types of stories (healing stories, parables, and others) as I would contend that we need to learn to read our entire sacred story with this new lens, to read/hear the entire text anew. The focus of this month's reading is the opening verses of the gospel, Mk 1:1-11. This is to hear the call to repent.

The story begins with this phrase: the beginning of the good news (*euangelion*) of Jesus Christ. We receive the gospel today generally in written form. Its early recipients would have heard it, heard proclamation. This was a new proclamation (*euangelion*), not that of the emperor but rather of Jesus *Christos*: Jesus, the anointed one. The gospel begins as sound, inviting us to hear, to draw our often neglected senses into the receiving, the hearing of the gospel. And these senses recognize Jesus as *Christos*, as the one named holy with the pouring out of oil, that rich material element.

## evoking our hearing

In verse 2, the evangelist continues to evoke our sense of hearing, to hear what is written in the scroll of the



The river Jordan and the surrounding wilderness

prophet Isaiah, to imagine the voice of the prophet speaking the call. It is a call to engage with the material elements, the desert, the pathway. The way of the anointed one is prepared for through evoking the sacred story of the Jewish people that includes the materiality of place. It invites readers into a world that includes the other-than-human.

Echoing this is the appearance of John in the wilderness. This wilderness evokes a geographic space with a unique habitat of animal and plant around the Sea of Salt. The desert also functions metaphorically in Israel's sacred story of its interrelationship with the holy One. It is a place of divine encounter in which discipline, purification and/or transformation take place (e.g. Deut 8:1-10 and Deut 30). The title given to John, namely the Baptizer, evokes water, the water of the Jordan River that flows through the wilderness as well as water that purifies.

John's location is the marginal place between wilderness and waterfront. He is in place, in the complexity of relationships within Earth

and its constituents. His clothes are of camel's hair, the belt around his waist is of hide or skin and his food is locusts and wild honey. The description of John in his habitat evokes the "gift exchange" process. The giving up of life in the Earth cycles — animals' skins for clothing, locust bodies for human food — allows a new habitat to emerge for John. These can be seen as "gift" as their "giving" provides John with a new place for his proclamation. As readers attending with respect to the processes of gift exchange we are tuning into the call to ecological *metanoia* (v. 4).

## key element: water

Like the multitudes of people (v. 5), Jesus, introduced in 1:1, comes to John for baptism. This ritual process is enacted with one of the key material elements necessary for life, namely water. Water is central in Earth's genealogy and its ongoing maintenance, as well as to the survival of so many species including the human. The presence of the divine in this scene is also evoked in material terms: the skies are torn

asunder and a spirit named to be of God is imaged as a dove alighting on Jesus (v. 10). Habitat, the human, and the holy intersect in this unique moment of encounter.

The gospel reader is invited to see what takes place on the Earth and in the skies and then to hear the heavenly voice. As at the beginning of this section, the listener's/reader's senses are evoked by what is encountered materially in the narrative. Jesus is then named as "son" and "beloved" by the affirming heavenly voice.

Habitat, the human and the holy are intimately interconnected as the Markan *euangelion* begins. I invite you to spend time with the short introduction to the Gospel of Mark (1:1-11) attentive to the complex relationships of habitat, the human, and the holy woven into the text and inviting our participation. ■

*Elaine Wainwright, a Sister of Mercy and scripture scholar, recently retired as the foundation Professor of Theology at the University of Auckland. She continues to research and write.*

# 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

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.

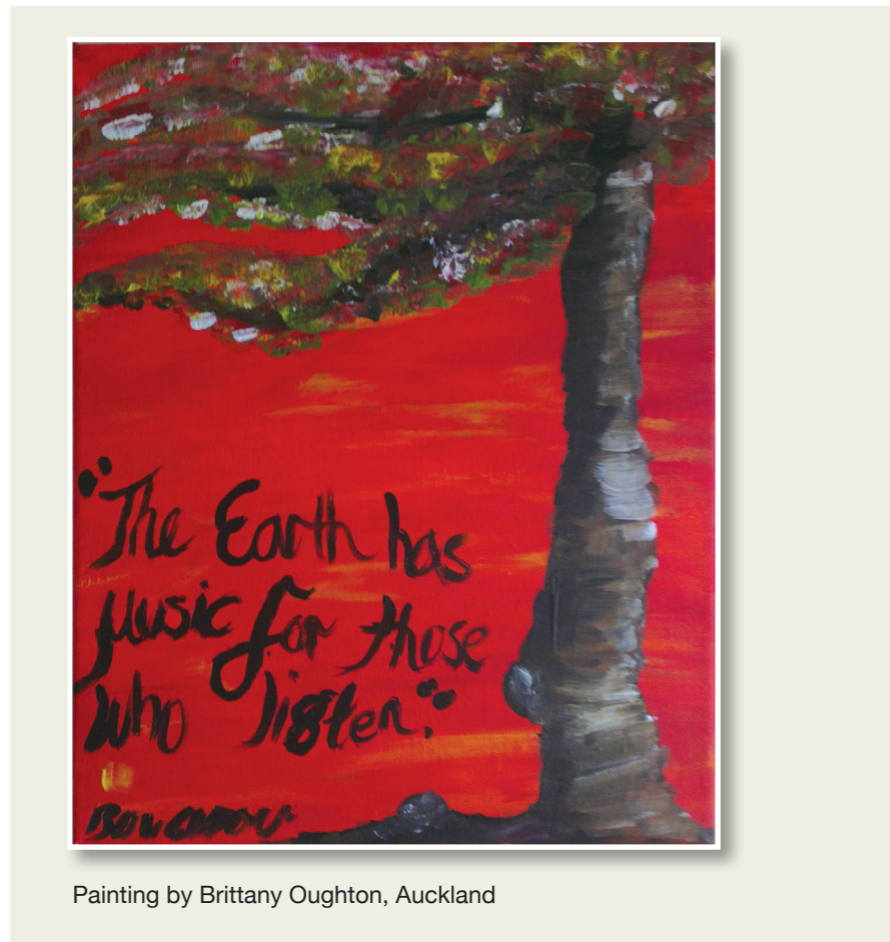
Verse 35 may have been read traditionally through the interpretive lens of the holy — Jesus, who is named "son of God", goes off in the early morning to pray, to maintain his relationship with the Holy One. The attentive ecological reader will note, however, that the Markan narrator

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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Painting by Brittany Oughton, Auckland

# an ecological reading of the gospel of mark

*In this third article in the series the author explores Mark 3:20-27 and the New Testament worldview as a way of understanding demon possession.*

Elaine Wainwright

Last month's ecological reading article closed with Jesus casting out demons (Mk 1:39) — "many demons" in an earlier verse (1:34). We gave this demon theme brief attention yet it is one of the key characteristics of Jesus' ministry in Mark's gospel. Jesus named his ministry as the *basileia*/kin[g]dom/empire of God being near at hand (Mark 1:15). I suggested that we might express that metaphor today as God's dream or God's transformative dream for the universe and for the Earth community within that universe. In light of this, how then might we re-read demon possession and the casting out of demons? The text which I've chosen as a focus is Mark 3:20-27.

Jesus' proclamation of the *basileia* of God has been characterised by healing or the restoration of right relationships with/in human bodies (1:29-31, 32-34, 40-45; 2:1-12; 3:1-5, 10). It is also characterised by the confronting of unclean spirits or demons which were said to possess human persons (1:21-28, 32-34, 39; 3:11-12, 15). The interpretation of aspects of first century sociality as demon possession was characteristic of a cosmology that we do not share today. However, we need to understand this cosmology so that we can do an ecological reading of the Markan theme of demon possession.

## from classical worldview

Much of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament reveals a classical cosmology, namely a three-tiered universe: the heavens above, earth in the

middle, and the underworld or Sheol below. God, or the gods, inhabited the heavenly realm, the human community the earth and those humans who had died, the underworld.

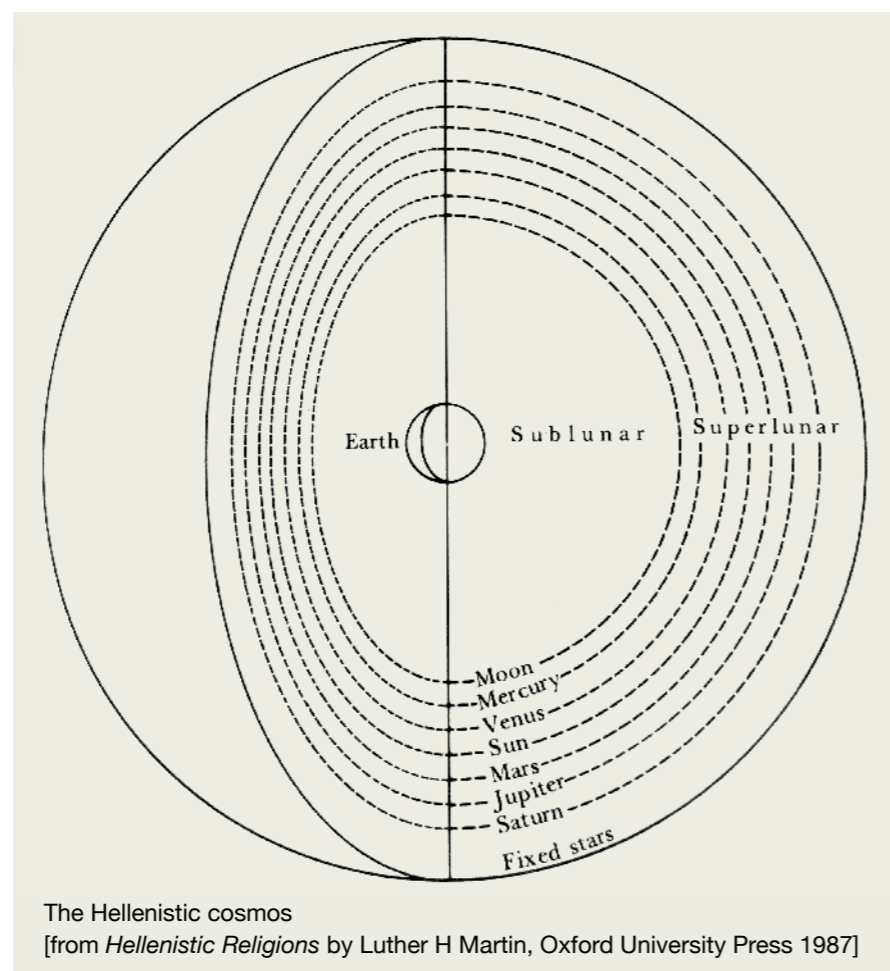
## to hellenistic worldview

In the Hellenistic period there was a significant shift in cosmology as a result of the insights of philosophers, astronomers and other ancient thinkers. They taught that while the earth was at the centre of the cosmology, and it was surrounded by seven planetary spheres or orbits. The moon, as the closest to earth, marked

out the sublunar realm while the other planets and stars made up the superlunar realm. The cosmic space that constituted the sublunar realm was populated not only by humans as earth-dwellers but also by powers and spirits, including the demonic. It is this shift in worldview which led to the significant presence of the demonic in the gospel narratives.

## to copernican worldview

As contemporary readers, we know of two further cosmological revolutions since the Hellenistic. The first was the Copernican or heliocentric,



namely that the earth and other planets revolve around the sun in an elliptical orbit.

## to evolutionary cosmology

The second is that which is currently unfolding: a universe that can be traced back to the Big Bang around 14 billion years ago. Planet Earth is estimated to be approximately 4.5 billion years old, with the first signs of life emerging on this planet between 2 and 3 billion years ago and human life only in the last two million years. All these processes are part of a creative unfolding.

It is with this scientific knowledge and worldview, or cosmology, that contemporary readers approach the gospel narrative with its world of demons and demon possession. As ecological readers we know we are not reading with a Hellenistic lens. We use the lens of contemporary ecological justice, informed by the gospel's socio-historical context that has left its traces in the text.

## order is disturbed

Returning to the Markan gospel, we find Jesus in Mark 3:20 in his house after having called twelve followers to share his ministry. Crowds have formed spontaneously seeking his healing and liberating ministry. They disrupt any attempt to withdraw, even time to eat. The Greek draws into the narrative the material substance, bread, in the concluding phrase "not able to eat bread" (3:20). The ecological reader notices the materiality of the bodies of those gathering as "crowd" around the physical structure of the house. Traces of all these elements remain in the text. As the narrative unfolds, the reader encounters two responses to this summary description of Jesus' ministry.

The first is the response of Jesus' family (3:21). They hear things about Jesus. Their senses are alert as information is conveyed. They respond by going out into the public forum where the crowds are gathered, in

order to take hold of Jesus. This is a physical response — one body meets another, either forcibly or not; the verb leaves the ambiguity in place. They verbalise their reason. The bystanders in the narrative hear it and so do the readers of the story — he is out of his normal state of mind or one could say, out of his normal way of being human body in a socio-political context. In a world in which kinship was the foundation of society, the family's criticism of Jesus points to his profound revisioning of the fundamental socio-cultural structure and belief system. This is augmented in the story by the later verse about Jesus' family in 3:31-35, a short text that you might want to read here.

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The second response to or interpretation of the crowd's acclamation of Jesus' ministry comes from 'the scribes' (3:22). They are described in relation to place, but a place other than that in which Jesus' ministry has unfolded. They have come down from Jerusalem. Previously in the story (1:5) people from Jerusalem came to John to be baptised, and they came from Jerusalem to Galilee (3:8) as a result of hearing what Jesus was doing. In 3:22, the scribes come down from Jerusalem to critique Jesus. The worldview in which they

express that critique is the Hellenistic world view of demon possession. They accuse Jesus of "having" Beelzebul, the ruler, the one with power over all demons. Jesus is said to be possessed by the most powerful of demons, those powers who inhabit the sub-lunar realm of the Hellenistic world view. The scribes go further to interpret the work of Jesus that freed people from the power of demons as being informed, empowered by Beelzebul. This language of power demonstrates one of the arenas in which demons and demon possession functioned — in the realm of power. In this instance, the power being constructed and attacked is primarily religious and then political.

As the encounter between Jesus and the Jerusalem scribes continues, Jesus uses two parables that draw in material and socio-political language and imagery (that of a kingdom and of a house) to speak of the demonic. Divided within they will destroy themselves. Clearly Jesus cannot belong to that world if he casts the demons from their places of power in that world. The segment closes with language and imagery of power but here it is the imagery of a householder who would defend his property from the thief unless he was himself tied up. Jesus' casting out of demons, his power as spirit-infused restorer of right ordering in the universe (1:10-11), is understood in relation to the right order of the cosmic sub-lunar realm through a Hellenistic cosmological lens. The contemporary ecological reader can read it in relation to the restoration of right ordering of/on planet Earth.

During the Lenten and Easter season, this language, imagery and cosmology take on an even more profound hue. ■

*Elaine Wainwright, a Sister of Mercy and scripture scholar, recently retired as the foundation Professor of Theology at the University of Auckland. She continues to research and write.*

# an ecological reading of the gospel of mark

In this fourth part in the series Elaine Wainwright uncovers the subversive message in the parable of the sower in Mark 4:1-9

Elaine Wainwright



Lake and shore of Galilee

It could be easy to think that the familiar “parable of the sower” is simple to read ecologically. Certainly it is rich in materiality with seeds, birds, soil, a sower and many other aspects. As readers we will find that the finely woven interconnections of habitat, human, and holy give depth to this parable.

## place – sea and land

Two opening verses before the parable begins can easily be overlooked but they weave together the materiality and the sociality of the human/other-than-human. Mark 4 begins “in place” — Jesus began to teach “beside the sea”. However the social nature of “large crowds” gathered around him is firmly linked to this place. The relationship between text and context is highlighted further when Jesus gets into “a boat on the sea”, sitting there to teach while the crowds are “beside the sea on the land”. The boat, the sea and the land function to create meaning. They give relational authority and power to Jesus. They both separate him from and yet relate him to the crowd on the land. As readers we are drawn into the interconnections in this habitat and we need to attend with all our senses to the narrative that will unfold.

## listen

Jesus’ opening word: “Listen!” — alerts our sense of hearing. The disciples in the text and we, the listeners to the text, are invited to listen/to hear and so engage our bodies in the act and art of listening. To ensure that the listeners are responding by bringing their bodies to the hearing of Jesus’ parable, the narrator follows the imperative, “Listen!” with the word *idou* (often translated “behold”) which is the marker of something of importance. Listeners are now doubly attentive and the parable begins: “A sower went out to sow”.

## sower and sowing

“The sower” in the Markan text may be imagined in a number of ways. He or she may be a slave or tenant farmer on one of the large Herodian or Roman estates that were becoming more numerous in first century Galilee. She or he might also be imagined as a self-sufficient small farmer, a member of a farming family. Each would have been intertwined in their social fabric in different ways but would have shared the understanding of the seasons with their rhythms of time for planting and for harvesting. The sower is engaged in the work of sowing. The type of seed is not specified. It is likely to be wheat

or barley, the two most common agricultural products of Galilee in the first century. An attentive reader will notice how the material and social embedded in the story reveal the ecological texture of Mark’s gospel.

The seed seems to have been thrown by hand rather than carefully planted in rows. This links the sower to the process of planting in order to grow grain to feed the family, the animals and also to have seed for the following year’s planting. However the pressure on farmers or tenants to produce abundant harvests for exports for the Empire also lurks within this world that the parable creates.

The parable draws the reader into the ecosystem, or ecocycle, of sower and seed. Birds take up the seeds on the pathway and are fed. Weeds take up their ground-space so there is insufficient room for the sower’s seed in some places. The sun with the wind and the rain, elements not explicitly named in the text, enable the seed to grow but if the root is not deep enough, some plants will wither under the sun. Others will be choked out by plants which are not useful in the agricultural cycle. The seed that falls on the prepared soil produces richly. An ecological reader will pick up on the network of living

and non-living materials in the hybrid habitat — from sower, to seed, to bird, sun, earth/soil, weeds and thorns.

## first century grain farming

Stephanie Nelson, a classical scholar, says that “because farming is inescapably a part of human life it may provide a clue to what is most basically human, and so a clue to our place within the cosmos.” Jesus, the parable teller, and his audience would have been thoroughly familiar with the agricultural system of first century Galilee. In this teaching by the sea Jesus invites listeners/readers to attend to the processes all around them. They would have known the prolific nature of grain given the right conditions. As well they would realise their need for such abundance in the face of the Roman taxation on a small farmer’s grain or soil.

Varro, a first century BCE scholar and agriculturalist, notes the variety in yields: tenfold in one district, fifteen in another, even a hundred to one near Gadara in Syria (Varro, *On Agriculture* 1.44.2). Pliny, the Roman naturalist, proclaims that nothing is more prolific than wheat giving yields of 150, 360 and 400 (*Natural History*, 18.21.94-95). However, as Pliny’s figures in particular are in the context of impressing the emperor, such figures may be exaggerated. Moldenke and Moldenke, who have studied plants of the Bible, suggest that a yield of about 20-fold can be expected of a crop of wheat in the Levant but that good soil and certain strains might produce 60 or even 100 grains each.

Many interpreters of this parable view the yields to be extraordinary — especially at 60 or 100. However it seems that these extraordinary yields are more descriptive when we consider the first century agriculture encoded in the text.

## God’s abundance

The subversive aspect of the parable lies elsewhere. Again materiality and its symbolism can assist us to discover it. On the two-sided coin minted by Agrippa I, the Roman-appointed ruler in Galilee 37–44 CE, are three ears of grain containing multiple seeds springing from one stalk. Like the seeds of the parable, they symbolise the fertility of the land.

However on the coin their abundance is attributed to Agrippa’s reign indicated by the royal umbrella-style canopy and the inscription on the obverse of the coin, “king/basileus Agrippa”. But the material context of Jesus and a



The Sower by James Tissot [Brooklyn Museum]

first century audience is embedded in the parable and proclaims not the *basileia*/empire of Rome — but the *basileia* of God/the holy (Mark 1:15).

Jesus’ parable draws listeners/readers into the complex world of the more-than-human in which multiple participants, including the human, are interwoven. Two different cosmologies are implicitly in tension within the parable and the network of associations it evokes. First there is that of the emperor and his representatives, whether a Herodian king in Galilee or landowners supporting the imperial system, who are claimed to be the source of abundance. On the other hand, the parable offers a more complex system of intertwined elements that intersect in the process of sowing seed. The surprise is that there is an ecology that can produce abundance. It is, however, hybrid, consisting of multiple participants. Jesus simply invites reflection on, or attentiveness to, the richness of habitat/human/holy and what such attentiveness will allow us to hear: “Let those who have ears, let them hear.” ■

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# an ecological reading of the gospel of mark

*In this fifth part in the series Elaine Wainwright unpacks the story of the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24-30*

Elaine Wainwright

*From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,<sup>25</sup> but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.<sup>26</sup> Now the woman was a Gentile [Greek], of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.<sup>27</sup> He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."<sup>28</sup> But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."<sup>29</sup> Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."<sup>30</sup> So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

[Mark 7:24-30 NRSV used with permission.]

In the first of this series, I explored how we might read scripture ecologically. Such a reading attends not only to the human and the holy that readers generally notice, but also to habitat. Place, space, together with all the elements of the natural and built environments, invite our scrutiny. They are mixed in with the holy and the human.

An ecological reading is a justice-oriented approach because it uncovers structures and practices of injustice in the entire more-than-human community. We find these injustices

woven into Mark's text from its first century context as well as from millennia of readings. In keeping with the prophetic tradition, it is important to undertake this critique together with our re-reading of the text for our times. These two tasks, critique and re-reading, can be interwoven into an ecological interpretation.

## borderland place

The Markan story of the encounter between Jesus and a woman who is identified only by her ethnic and geographic location (Mk 7:26) is grounded in place. As the story opens, Jesus leaves a place designated very generally by the adverb "there". The last place named in the story was Genessareth (Mk 6:53) where Jesus was healing (Mk 6:53-56), alerting ecological readers to the bodiliness associated with such healing as bodies touched. The place also encodes the materiality of the plain along the north-western side of the Sea of Galilee, rich in agriculture as the bread basket of the region.

The entanglement in habitat continues as Mk 7:24 unfolds. Jesus moves to the region of Tyre on the Mediterranean coast which borders upper Galilee. It is a borderland space where ethnicities and access to material resources were in complex interrelationship. Historically, Israel had shared a tense relationship with Tyre, which had a history of wealth.

However, as an island city it needed not only its own hinterland to supply its inhabitants with food (bread) but also the land of its most immediate neighbor, Galilee. We find encoded in this opening verse bread and boundary, and the economic power that functions in relation to them.

As contemporary readers we will recognise the permeable nature of many borders for humans and other-than-humans today and the complex interrelationships across borders.

## tangles of meaning

The attention shifts in Mk 7:25 to an unidentified woman (later tradition will call her *Justa*, the just one) who is described in relation to her daughter who, in her turn, is described in relation to her body — she has in her body an unclean spirit. (The daughter is identified twice in this way.) That is all we know of each of them at this point. The description given to the woman's daughter could evoke a number of different bodily ailments or malfunctions that were attributed to evil or unclean spirits. Spirits and humans were thought to inhabit the same sub-lunar realm in first century cosmology. Spirits were believed to attack the human body and to damage social relationships. Given the complex material and socio-cultural relationships already identified with the border location, as readers we might well consider how

much of this is projected onto the body of the young girl. The woman, desperate for her daughter's healing, falls at Jesus' feet. This accentuates the socio-religious, cultural and gender differentiations inherent in this story as well as a recognition of Jesus' healing power.

### bread and dogs

It is only in Mk 7:26 that the woman herself is identified and then it is in relation to her ethnic origins and geographic location. She is Greek, *Hellēn*. "Syro-Phoenician" makes her ethnically Phoenician and geographically from the Syrian coast or hinterland. While she is located in place she has no name. However she acts decisively. She asks ("begs" in the NRSV translation) Jesus to heal her daughter. The text further highlights the impact of the border location.

The gospel reader is shocked by Jesus' response to the woman: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (Mk 7:27). This resonates with the tone of an ethnic insider looking from his own side of the border and naming the neighbouring peoples with words that encode in the text material elements used as symbol — "children's bread" and "dogs".

Bread is a daily staple that can represent a parent's care for his or her child. Earlier in the gospel narrative Jesus has fed a multitude of men with bread ("not counting women and children" the Matthean narrator will add, indicating that they too were fed — Mk 6:30-44; cf Matt 14:21). The phrase in Jesus' statement, "and throw it to the dogs", puts a negative construction on dogs. They are presumably outside the house and bread is thrown to them, rather than given with care, and then only after the children, insiders, have been fed first. This establishes a hierarchy that impacts into the human and other-than-human worlds.

### hierarchy rearranged

But the words and imagery of the woman's reply upturn this hierarchy. She brings the dogs from outside to a place under the table (not yet at the table) where they share the children's crumbs. Her words are consistent with illustrations on first century reliefs showing dogs present at the dinner table and being offered food by children. An ecological reader will understand both the "bread" and the "dogs" of Mk 7:28 not just metaphorically but will *critique* the way they are used in support of

hierarcy and *reclaim* them in their interrelationship.

### healing and wholeness

As a result of the unnamed woman's word/*logos*, Jesus proclaims that her daughter has been freed of the demon. It is the woman, not Jesus, who has been able to see a world healed of borders and boundaries that exclude, and of gendered relationships that oppress in word and deed. The materiality of place, or space on the edge, or at the in-between, is the context for such healing. And human bodies, bread and dogs are actors encoded in its unfolding. Healing happens to an individual and happens in relationships — grounded in space, time and in all that is material and social in them.

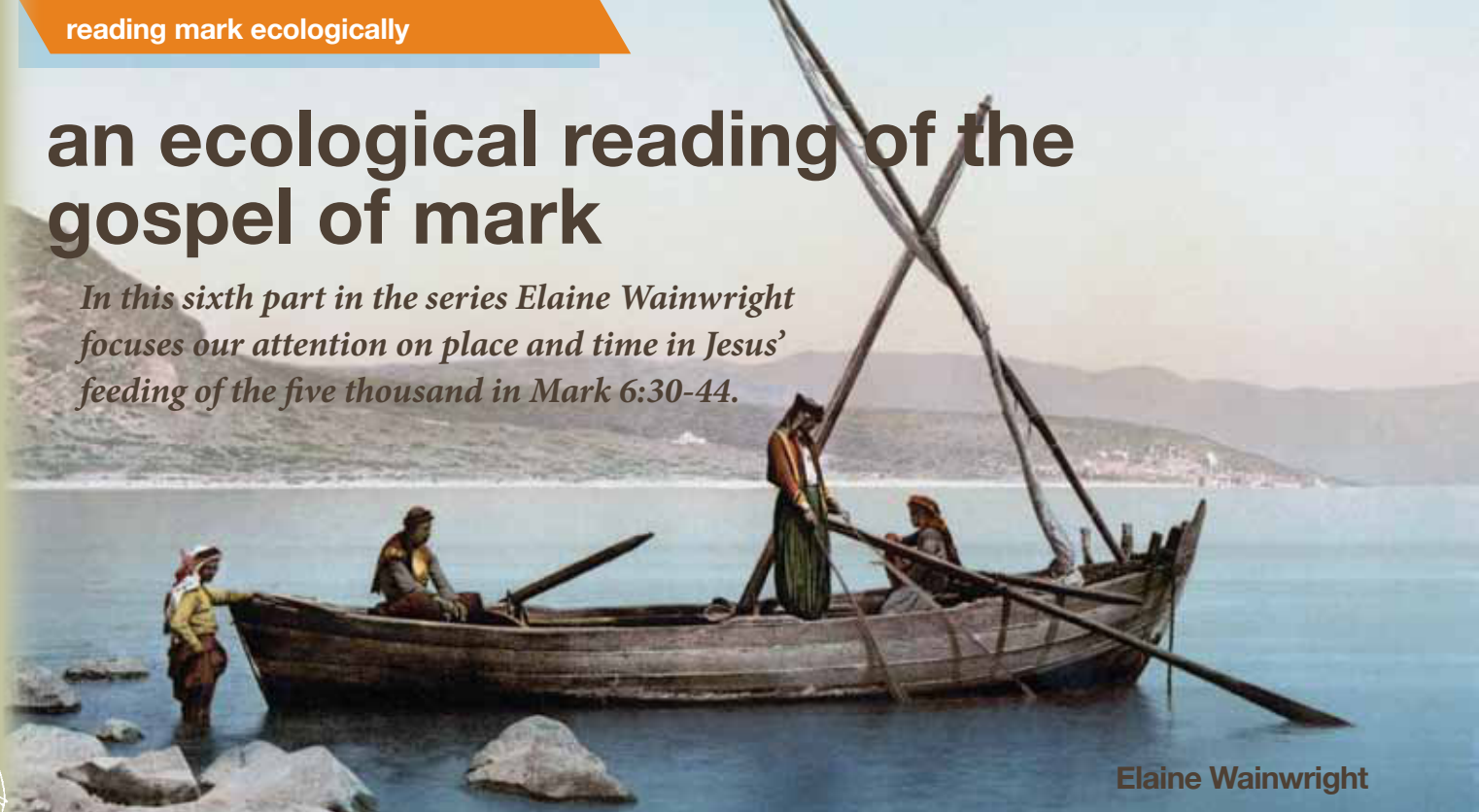
What the text does not say but seems to imply is that in this encounter Jesus was healed too. Then he was able to see with an inclusive vision as children and dogs moved to new places in relation to house and table. Indeed the demon was gone. ■

*Elaine Wainwright RSM is the emeritus Professor of Theology at The University of Auckland and an independent biblical scholar.*



# 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.

— NRSV. Used with permission

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 gathers 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](http://www.ericfeather.com) [Used with permission.]



# an ecological reading of the gospel of mark

*In this seventh part in the series Elaine Wainwright focuses our attention on time, location and the permeable space between human and holy in the story of the transfiguration in Mark 9:2-8.*

Elaine Wainwright

<sup>2</sup> Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, <sup>3</sup> and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. <sup>4</sup> And there

appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. <sup>5</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” <sup>6</sup> He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

<sup>7</sup> Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him. <sup>8</sup> Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus!”  
NRSV. (Used with permission)

The story we name the “Transfiguration of Jesus” has a number of features that invite us to read ecologically.

## time – six days

The narrative begins with a very explicit time designator: six days later. Had we been first-century listeners to the Markan story-telling, we would have had ears attuned to details such as the “six days” reference that we, as contemporary readers, tend to miss (we can always go back and re-read, so we are not as attentive as those early listeners would have been). The “six days” seems to link this story back to the previously located event, which was when Jesus and the disciples visited the villages in the region of Caesarea Philippi (Mk 8:27). There, Peter proclaimed Jesus as the *Christos*, the anointed one, the liberating one, the one engaged bodily with the poor and the suffering — touching bodies and taking and blessing bread. But Jesus immediately introduces another aspect of his unfolding role as *Christos*. It is that he will suffer bodily degradation caused by leaders who are threatened by the way he lives out his appointed task as God’s anointed (Mk

8:31-32a). Jesus will face death as all Earth-beings face death — but his will be a premature death visited on him by other human hands.

## place – up a high mountain

Having noted the time explicitly in the opening phrase of Mk 9:2, the ecological reader will be attentive to the grounded place in which the narrative is located: up a very high mountain. Habitat and human are intimately connected here as the narrator recounts Jesus’ taking of Peter, James and John with him up this “very high mountain”. This seemingly simple description encodes layers of meaning in the narrative texture of the text. The materiality of the “mountain” holds the reader’s attention initially, an engagement that would be very familiar to New Zealand readers from their own experiences of a “high mountain”. Its materiality is near the surface of consciousness.

At a second level of meaning-making, the mountain can evoke for readers Moses’s journey/s up the high mountain of Sinai (see Ex 24:15–18) and hence the mountain as place of

encounter with the divine, the Holy One. Both layers of meaning play in this text.

## seeing and experiencing

The senses give access to what is material. The sense of “seeing” functions powerfully in this particular scene. The disciples have to “see” Jesus to know he is “transfigured” before them. The translation of the verb *metamorphoein* as “to transfigure” can tend to obscure the sensory experience. A dictionary explanation “to change in a manner *visible* to others” (*italics mine*), evokes the bodily sense of seeing. Jesus is changed in a manner visible to the three disciples and yet this change is one that is more than human: his garments became glistening, intensely white in a way unknown to human experience — “as no fuller on earth could bleach them” is the Markan phraseology. The evangelist grapples with language that will articulate the change that the disciples “see” and “experience”. The human and the holy intersect in the materiality of the body and of the clothing of Jesus transfigured and this is “seen” by attentive disciples. The space between

the human and the holy is permeable.

The verb *horaein* “to perceive by the eye” in Mk 9:4 continues to evoke the material sense of seeing or perceiving. The verb is in the passive and carries the connotation of “appeared” or “made an appearance in a transcendent manner”. Two “holy ones” from Israel’s history, Moses and Elijah, are speaking with the transfigured Jesus. They too experienced transformative encounters with the holy (Moses in Ex 24:15–18 as noted above and Elijah on Horeb, 1 Kgs 19:11–15), encounters that took place in their bodies. All these transformations occur in a grounded/earthly space — on a mountain. Indeed, Peter seeks to capture this extraordinary experience, to “earth” it in “three booths”, rather than to let it function at that point of radical intersection between the human/earth and the holy. Peter is “exceedingly afraid” in the face of such radical intersection. On the other hand the text invites us as readers into such a space.

### hearing and listening

The materiality of the mountaintop experience continues as a cloud overshadows the group while a voice from out of the cloud confirms the radical intersection of human and holy. The voice engages another of the senses, that of hearing. Its very invitation is to listen — to listen to him/Jesus. He is the one who is named by the voice as the beloved of the Holy One.

### place, human and holy

As the scene comes to a sudden close (Mk 9:8) the sense of seeing is once again evoked, linking human and habitat. In the grounded context in which transfiguration took place, the three disciples see no one but “only Jesus”. The final verse in Greek concludes with the phrase “with them” — they no longer see anyone but only Jesus with them — still on the high mountain. The extraordinarily subtle interweaving of habitat, human and holy together with the evocation of the senses in this short



Mount Tabor

narrative functions as an invitation to ecological readers to an encounter with just such radical intersection.

### need ecological reading

We are encouraged in such ecological readings of our sacred story by Pope Francis. In his recent encyclical *Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home* he offered the following challenge: “If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and *no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it*” (par 63).

The scriptures, our sacred story,

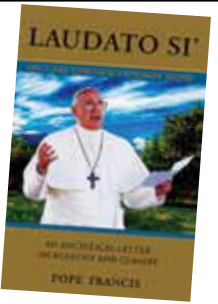
are one “form of wisdom” and are included in “religion and the language particular to it”. As we attend to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor, we are invited to hear our sacred story anew, particularly to hear the voice of Earth in the many voices rising up from various habitats. Thus, we will, continuing in the words of Pope Francis, attend to our “Judeo-Christian tradition” in ways “which can render our commitment to the environment more coherent” (par 15). ■

*Elaine Wainwright RSM is Professor Emeritus University of Auckland and an independent biblical scholar.*


## Laudato Si’

**(Praise Be to You):  
On Care For Our Common Home**  
*An encyclical letter on ecology and climate*  
**By Pope Francis, (Author)**

Possibly one of the most important encyclicals of our time, Pope Francis addresses humanity’s relationship with the natural world in *Laudato Si’*. The Christian and secular world have been captivated by the papacy of Pope Francis, and this encyclical has drawn huge attention globally to the critical ecological and environmental issues facing us all.



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# 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).

*Elaine Wainwright RSM is Professor Emeritus of The University of Auckland and an independent biblical scholar.*

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


## Laudato Si'

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# an ecological reading of the gospel of mark

*In the ninth part in this series Elaine Wainwright reads Mark 11:1-10; 15-19 showing how the carnival-like story-telling upends the usual order and draws readers into a different world.*

Elaine Wainwright

**C**hed Myers says that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in Mark 11:1-10 resembles "carefully choreographed street theatre". It turns the world upside down in ways that upset or disturb, especially those with political, economic or social power. We can extend this claim of the carnivalesque, or upturning of worlds, to Mark 11:15-19 — Jesus' "cleansing" of the temple. We participate in such upturning of worlds, decentring the human and attending to the other-than-human — place, space, animals and built environments that abound in these texts when we read ecologically. We discover habitat, human and holy as profoundly intertwined. Our way of seeing needs to be turned upside-down though so that we learn to attend to habitat.

In the opening verse Mark (11:1), grounds the story and us as readers in location, calling our attention to habitat. We can imagine the dusty and well-worn path that brings those travelling from Jericho to Jerusalem "near to the Mount of Olives". As its name suggests, this eastern ridge reached before entering the city would have been covered with fruit-bearing olive trees. The text draws the ecological reader even more profoundly into the material locations: at Bethphage and Bethany. Both were small villages or built environments, alive with human and other-than-human inhabitants engaged in life.

## colt not war-horse

An element of the carnivalesque emerges as Jesus seems to send the disciples on their errand to secure a colt from both villages — from Bethphage and from Bethany. The atmosphere builds with Jesus assuming the right to use the colt which he does not own.

An ecological reader, perhaps like Mark's original readers, will be tantalised by the reference to the "colt" in this story. The Greek word *pólos* can designate the young of any animal. When it stands alone, as it does in this narrative, it generally refers to the colt of a horse but other possibilities play in the ecological texture of this passage.

In the first century Graeco-Roman world and its centres of power, the war-horse carried a victorious king, emperor

or general triumphantly into a city to claim it as his prize. The carnivalesque is at work when Jesus chooses a colt that no one had ever ridden, so still quite young, rather than a full-grown war horse. However the enactment of carnival does not obscure the materiality of the animal. Both function together in this text read ecologically and invite readers to reflect on the human-animal interrelationship. Both are full and active players in the unfolding drama of life.

## upending the expected order

The carnival enactment reaches its climax in Mk 11:7-8. This is made possible through the extraordinary agency of the material elements in this story. The disciples bring the colt to Jesus and put their garments on it, mirroring the



splendid blankets on the horse of the triumphant Roman general or king as he entered his city. Other material elements are also out of place. The crowds spread cloaks or clothing on the road and take leafy branches from trees and lay them on the road. The world is being turned upside down. This continues as the crowds that go before and follow Jesus cry out with “hymns and acclamations” in a way that mimics the triumphant entry accompanying a king or a general. Multiple material elements participate with the human actors in this drama that parodies the religious and political powers residing in Jerusalem who will be aligned against Jesus as the narrative unfolds rapidly.

### bodies and habitat

We find elements of the carnival in Mk 11:15-19 as Jesus' actions on the temple mount continue to upturn the prevailing world. Readers see Jesus entering the temple mount and creating mayhem, acting in ways he was not authorised to in the prevailing order of the religious and cultural society. This text is characterised by bodies “in-place” and “out-of-place”. It opens into a network of time and space in which the human, in particular the character Jesus in all his bodiliness, and habitat are woven together in complex ways in the text.

The first evidence of this is that the word “temple” occurs three times within the first two verses of the scene, drawing the reader into the material setting. It evokes the temple built of massive Jerusalem stone, constructed as part of Herod's grandiose building programme in Jerusalem. It was the domain of ritual or cultic practices presided over by Jerusalem's priestly aristocracy, predominantly the high priest, chief priests and Sadducees. These formed the Jewish elite who controlled the temple and also occupied the wealthy houses that archaeologists have uncovered on the western slope opposite the temple. Political and religious power finds expression in the material elements encoded in the narrative. The lone Jesus confronts this privilege — indeed overturns it.

### different world possible

We find ourselves as readers of Mk 11:15-16 in the midst of bodies and birds, tables and stools. Jesus casts out those named as “buying and selling” in the temple just as he cast out demons — so adding to the carnival. Human bodies are caught up in this melee that Jesus is creating with the money-changers' material tables and the stools or seats of those selling doves (the fate of the doves themselves is not visible in the text). This is indeed carnival. Through these actions Jesus is re-ordering the economic, socio-political, religious and material relationships embodied in the temple. This is the hope of those who enter into carnival or “street theatre” as Ched Myers calls it. Momentarily the world is turned upside down and participants are invited into a different world.

Mk 11:17 creatively intertwines two biblical texts, Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. It contrasts the “ideal” temple that Jesus' actions are symbolically enacting and the temple

evoked in pious words that are accompanied by profound injustices in the lives of the people and their leaders. In this verse Jesus' challenge is to the leaders and to those trading in the temple — all those using this space inappropriately.

This invites the ecological reader into the world opening up in front of the text. It is a world in which contemporary readers are challenged to ask about space and its relationship to economic, socio-cultural and religious activities — where they might intersect and where they must diverge. This is not to suggest a retreat into a dualism of sacred and secular space but rather a much richer exploration of material space (habitat) and its relation to the human and the holy that this text evokes.

As the Markan gospel continues to unfold, readers are drawn into the poignancy of this time in the life of Jesus. And the street theatre or carnival, turning of the world upside down, takes readers to the heart of the experience. We know that Planet Earth and all its in-habitants are, like Jesus, at a poignant moment. One invitation to us, the human community, is to learn the way of carnival, to turn our current world upside down so that the other-than-human might demand our attention and our care. ■

*Elaine Wainwright RSM is Professor Emeritus of Theology at The University of Auckland and an independent biblical scholar.*

**Photo:** Mount of Olives

**Painting:** *Christ Driving the Money Lenders from the Temple* by Michael Smither. [www.michael-smither.co.nz](http://www.michael-smither.co.nz).

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# an ecological reading of the gospel of mark

*In this tenth part in the series Elaine Wainwright remembers the story of the woman who pours costly perfumed ointment on Jesus' head while he is in Simon's house in Mark 14:3-9.*



**Mark 14: 3** While Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. **4** But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted

in this way? **5** For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. **6** But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. **7** For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to

them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. **8** She has done what she could; she has anointed/ ointmented my body beforehand for its burial. **9** Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

**N**ovember is a time of remembering and particularly remembering those who are our ancestors in the gospel/good news, especially those with whom we are intimately interconnected. Therefore it seems appropriate to choose for our ecological reading a story that commissions our remembering (Mark 14:3-9). This story of an unnamed woman concludes with Jesus' affirmation of remembering her together with "what she has done", what she has held and touched and poured and smelled. Her story invites us to remember our loved ones in their rich engagement with the physical and the material aspects of their lives as well as the social, that is more familiar to us.

## beginning to re-member

In re-membering the pouring woman (whom I would like to name *Murisa*), we are invited into a house, a material dwelling which reminds readers of the many similar places in which Jesus' ministry has taken place (Mk 2:1, 11; Mk 5:19; Mk 7:17). The naming of the householder as "Simon the Leper" evokes Jesus' ministry of healing, of reaching out and touching and of being touched in return (See Mk 1:40-45). The house in

which readers encounter Jesus in the opening of this narrative is characterised by healing. This, in its turn, can remind readers to be attentive to the ethos that we create or bring into dwelling places in which we live and into which we enter for other purposes. It also can remind us of the places in which we re-member our loved ones and in which we shared food and life with them.

Relationships continue as Jesus and Simon and those whom we meet in Mk14: 4 are reclining at a meal. The context evoked is that of table companionship, which has been characteristic of Jesus' life and ministry. Jesus is being remembered in this story amid all the material aspects of couches, bodies reclining, and food being shared. It is into this rich material and relational context that a woman comes. The Greek phrase opening this next movement in the narrative is *ēlthe gynē* – "came a woman". She/*Murisa* courageously enters a space that is not hers according to the culture.

The gospel narrator does not pause on this anomaly, however, but moves immediately to describe her action: she brings with her a beautiful alabaster jar containing very costly ointment of nard, and

she breaks open the jar and pours the ointment on the head of the reclining Jesus. This is a lavish action and the material elements she has with her enhance this. Alabaster is a beautiful translucent marble that is gift of the Earth. The content of the alabaster jar was *muron*, a reference to a range of perfumes and perfumed oils (note that the content is not *oinon*, the term used for oil of anointing).

## healing not anointing

In exploring the language and the context written into this text, it becomes clear that the action evoked is not that of anointing, just as the materials are not those associated with anointing. Rather both action and language find an echo in an ancient text called the *Deipnosophistae* [*The Sophists at Dinner*] by Athenaeus. There we learn, among many aspects important for interpreting this text, that "[a] highly important element of health is to put good odours to the brain or head — *enkephelē/kephelē* (xv.687). This suggests that the woman's action was not seen as an anointing but rather healing. It was putting good odours to the head and neck of her companion and friend, Jesus, as he faced into a most terrible death (Mk 14:1-2). And it was the beautiful



*muron* in an Earth-grounded alabaster jar that accompanied and enabled her healing action. Earth and its elements were brought by *Murisa* to this poignant moment in the life of Jesus — his facing his death.

### right use of resources

Those sharing the meal with Jesus and Simon object to such a lavish and earthy action. They move into what can be seen as the language of “commodity exchange” — beautiful jar and ointment sold and the money given to the poor. Readers may remember, however, that there has been little indication in the Markan narrative up to this point of the concern for the poor among those accompanying Jesus. At one level, therefore, their voices do not seem to ring true.

They do, however, give us pause, especially at this time when *Laudato Si'* echoes around us as it turns our lenses to the cry of the Earth and cry of the poor. The way we respect and use Earth resources needs discernment. The voice of Jesus speaks into this, claiming that at this time, it is he himself who needs the

gift of healing *muron*. *Murisa* has made the right choice in relation to her use of resources.

Jesus re-affirms the actions of *Murisa*, interpreting her action in pouring out the perfumed ointment as a preparing of his body for burial (Mk 14: 8). She is doing what disciples, male and female do: prepare the material body of their teacher for burial (one of the many acts of re-remembering those one loves). The words of Jesus affirm her relationship with/her use of Earth resources, but also go beyond what has been visible in the story to this point.

### re-remembering

Verse nine concludes this short but highly significant narrative (Mk 14:3-9). It continues to foreground the woman and her action focusing readers/listeners on the entanglement of earthed-human-bodies, including a body in extreme pain, and the power of other earth elements to heal when body and substance meet. This is placed at the heart of the “good news” that is to be proclaimed *eis holon ton kosmon* (to/in the whole cosmos) — the entire planetary realm

for contemporary readers. It is also to be remembered in time — every time the gospel is proclaimed.

The Markan storyteller does not place Jesus at the centre of this story and its remembering. Rather s/he affirms the extraordinary interconnectedness within the story’s interaction that collectively constitutes “good news”. It far transcends a single human action or person. It echoes in and through the person of the woman, the materiality of her *muron*, her extraordinary action and in the body of Jesus. The ecological reader remembers the woman precisely in what is enacted in the house of Simon. Thus, to remember the woman (and the poured out *muron*) in this way is to read ecologically. As we re-member *Murisa* during this month of remembering, we also re-member our loved ones whom we can catch up into this material and cosmic remembering. ■

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**Above:** Bas relief of Woman pouring healing ointment on Jesus in Simon's house.