

Jesus, Lover of Nature

In this extract from **Fr Dermot Lane's** forthcoming book, *Nature Praising God*, the relationship of Jesus with nature is highlighted. Fr Lane is a priest of the Dublin diocese, ministering in Balally parish.

In the context of climate change, the loss of biodiversity, and the Covid crisis, the question is asked: what is the relationship between Jesus and nature? What does Jesus have to say about the natural world, what is the significance of the Incarnation for a theology of nature? Up to now, very little attention was given to the relationship between Jesus and the natural world, beyond the observation that he appealed to nature to talk about the coming reign of God. It is worth noting that Jesus lived much of his life in close proximity to the natural world:

- He spent 40 days in the desert
- He was with the wild animals in the desert
- He was baptised in the river Jordan by John the Baptist
- The transfiguration of Jesus occurred on Mount Tabor
- He often retired to quiet places of nature to pray



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- He taught on and around the Lake of Galilee
- He suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane
- He appeared to Mary Magdalene in the Garden of Resurrection

These encounters with the natural world had an influence on the life of Jesus. Many of these moments included prayerful communion with God his Father. They left a deep impression on him, so much so that when he taught about the coming reign of God, he drew on his knowledge of the natural world.

In the Synoptics, Jesus shows a remarkable understanding of the natural world. Richard Bauckham lists the following references to animals: birds,



camel, chicken, dog, donkey, dove, fish, fox, gnat, goat, moth, ox, pig, raven, scorpion, sheep, snake, sparrow, viper, vulture, and wolf. Among the plants he refers to: bramble, fig tree, herbs, mulberry, mustard plant, reed, thorn, vine, weed, wheat, and wild flower. This familiarity with the natural world would have been inspired by, and based on the rich Jewish theology of Nature, as found in the Psalms, Genesis, Ezekiel and Job, with which Jesus would have been familiar. Diverse commentators, such as James Mackey, Roger Haight, and Richard Bauckham, talk about the existence of a creation-centred faith in the life of Jesus. The life of Jesus was lived out of a deep Jewish creation-faith and theology. This closeness of Jesus to

the natural world and the life of creation does not make him an ecologist before his time, but it does illustrate his awareness of the presence of the Spirit of God in the natural world.

Jesus lived out of a creation-centred-faith. For example, he refers to 'Your Father in heaven' who "makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends the rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Mt 5:44-45)...A similar example can be found in Matthew 10, which talks about two sparrows sold for a penny and "yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father ...' (M 10: 29-31). God our Father is intimately involved in the life of all creation and not just the lives of human beings.

On a number of occasions, we find Jesus engaging directly with the natural world. ... in the wilderness, and was with the beasts (Mk 1: 13). Another example of Jesus engaging with the natural world can be found in the nature miracles. The story of Jesus walking on the water and stilling the storm resonates with the Genesis story: "A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat ... '(Mk 4: 38). And then, Jesus "woke up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, peace and be still. Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm' (Mk 4: 39). This story echoes with the creation story of Genesis 1: 1ff in which God subdues the water of chaos 'in the beginning'... other miracles, such as the miracles of healing, exorcisms and nature miracles point towards a renewal of creation as part of the coming reign of God.❤