**Christian Mystics and the Environment**

**Lent Address**

**St Edmundsbury Cathedral**

**Friday 6 March 2020**

It’s well known that St Francis of Assisi “invented” the nativity scene, by including animals along with Mary, Joseph, the baby and the crib. For Francis, creation is imbued with God. The birth of Jesus, the incarnation, shows how God is in all things. So animals are included in the nativity scene.

I’ll refer to St Francis a few times. There are stories of birds and animals listening to his voice, stories of wild creatures falling under his spell. So Francis is a good guide for us.

Christian mysticism is a huge topic and the environment is a huge topic. Today I will focus on two themes from Christian mystics: the environment is sacred, and the environment is God’s.

Mystics of many traditions see the environment as sacred. Christian mystics are not unique in that. Christian mystics stand in the tradition of believing in God as Trinity: by traditional, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The alternative “Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer” is better for our environment focus. Christian mystics are not free-floating spiritual beings. They know themselves to be children of God, existing thanks to God’s love. They know they are creatures. For Christians, the environment is creation. Not here by chance. Creation exists because of God’s creativity, because of God’s generosity, because God wills it to be. The environment, creation, is sacred because God creates it. Christian mystics feel this with a deep intensity. Mystics have fallen in love with God. So they talk about God with passion. They express their love for God to anyone who will listen. Like people in love, Christian mystics go on and on about God’s beauty and generosity.

Some of you have heard me quote Elizabeth Barrett Browning before. A favourite quote about creation being sacred. “Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees, takes off his shoes, the rest sit around it and pluck blackberries, and daub their faces unaware.”

Or as Gerald Manley Hopkins put it “Glory be to God for dappled things – For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow; For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim; Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings; Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough; And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.”

Christian mystics see God everywhere. They see the unity of all things in God. And creation has an inherent dignity. We care for the environment because, like every person, all creatures have an immeasurable value as creatures of God.

Notice this is different to being “stewards of creation”. Stewards of creation implies some kind of superiority, and worse some kind of separation. Mystics remind us we are one with creation. Co-creatures. Co-bearers of divinity.

St Francis helps again in his language of brother sun and sister moon, brother wind and sister water, brother fire and sister earth. [[1]](#footnote-1) In Francis, and in other mystics, we see “an approach to God in which the soul, while communing in a humble, brotherly way with creatures, is reconciled both to its entire self and to the entirety of reality.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

Creation is sacred and creation is God’s. But there is more to be said. Christian mystics remind us there is another side of the coin. Recognising our place in creation is not about feeling peace and unity for its own sake. Remembering we are one with creation is more than seeing God in the snowdrops, for all that it is good to recognise God in creation. The reality is we do not live in an Eden-like paradise. There is something wrong with the world, seen in disunity, strife, separation. In Christian language, sin has invaded the world. It is not enough to rejoice in nature. We have to repair the world. We have to engage with tricky issues and politics. We have to show compassion and forgiveness, bring healing to a broken world. And today more than ever we are aware that our environment needs healing. St Francis did this by embracing a life of poverty, providing for lepers, preaching peace in the Holy Land.

It is deeply significant that Francis sang his Canticle of Brother Sun whilst enduring great suffering, physical pain and blindness. At the same time, around him his friars were divided and fighting. Out of this darkness, spiritual enlightenment came. Out of this darkness, Francis praised God through the wonders of creation. [[3]](#footnote-3) The resurrection comes out of the desperation of Good Friday. In Francis we see how the wonder of creation and the suffering of creation are inseparable. In Francis we see the sacred creation and the fractured creation. In Francis we see how the experience of interconnection with creation goes hand in hand with giving yourself to care for and heal creation.

There’s another gift that Christian mystics give us in relation to the environment. A gift that saves us from believing the spiritual life is about having nice feelings about God. It’s the gift of images for the spiritual life that draw on nature, particularly the power and danger of nature. Evelyn Underhill put it like this “Entering [the spiritual life] means exchanging the lovely view [of the hills] for the austere reality [of the high mountains]; penetrating the strange hill country, slogging up stony tracks in heavy boots, bearing fatigue and risking fog and storm, helping fellow climbers at one’s own costs. It means renouncing the hotel-life of religion with its comforts and conveniences, and setting our face towards the snows”. [[4]](#footnote-4)

Evelyn Underhill takes this image from a Christian mystic whose experience was similar to St Francis finding enlightenment through darkness. St John of the Cross lived in sixteenth century Spain. He set about trying to reform monastic life. Challenging authority and well-established traditions tends to generate resistance. So it was for John. His enemies wanted to shut him up. They kidnapped him and locked him up in cupboard. John spend many weeks alone and in the dark with only a glimpse of light when the sun was shining at a particular angle in the day. Alone, at the mercy of his captors, with no idea what the future held and if he’d be free again, increasingly desperate. It was at this point that John had a mystical experience, an experience of God’s presence. Later he came to see it was an experience of God’s immeasurable love. He was able to experience the enormity, the overwhelming nature of God’s love because all other comfort had been stripped away.

John of the Cross is remembered as a spiritual guide. Based on his experience, he came up with images for the spiritual journey. One of his images is walking up a mountain. We are to take the very narrow path that goes steeply up the mountain. Taking that path we are to avoid the wider, apparently better paths to the left and right. We climb high above the security of the valley. And like many climbers, we feel exhilarated because we think we can see the top. But John teaches that the true climb is yet to come. Towering above us is an immense precipice. If we venture on, we realise that between the lovely alpine pastures of the spiritual life and the towering precipice of God above us, between the pastures and the precipice are the mysterious regions of the everlasting snows. To tackle the precipice, we must be led by the Spirit of God. Success depends on self-abandonment and courage. “Everyone suffers on the precipice.” [[5]](#footnote-5) “The naked soul must cling as best it can to the naked rock of reality.” [[6]](#footnote-6) It is the only way to the real summit, “the supernatural life of perfect union with the self-giving and outpouring love of God.” [[7]](#footnote-7)

Strangely we are back where we started with St Francis and the nativity scene. We usually associate sweet nativity scenes with feelings of warmth and comfort. In fact, Christmas, the Incarnation is about the awe-inspiring reality of the self-giving and outpouring love of God.

John of the Cross offers us images from nature because the environment is sacred and the environment is God’s. All of creation, including us here within creation, belong to God. Creation exists because of God’s creativity, because of God’s generosity, because God wills it to be. For Christian mystics, that reality governs how we treat, how we care for the environment.

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1. The Canticle of Brother Sum [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eloi Leclerc quoted in *Franciscan Spirituality* by Brother Ramon SSF p.143 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ibid p. 141 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Quoted in *The Lion Christian Meditation Collection* p.170 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid p.171 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-7)