

Jesus and the sacred wild

Noel Moules explores the biblical foundations for Christian Animism

Jesus emerges from his baptism in the wild waters of the Jordan River, “full of the Spirit ... and immediately” (we are told), “the Spirit drove him *into* the wilderness... and he was *with* the wild animals” (Lk 4:1; Mk 1:12-13). This powerful statement expresses much more than Jesus having a love for the solitude of wild spaces. It opens a story that reveals His true relationship with the world, and wild nature in particular, which can only be described as *animist*. It also implies that following Him has at its heart a call to Christian Animism: alive with God’s life-giving, Creation-sustaining Spirit, and offering an Earth-focused spirituality of harmony and hope.

The word “animism” is shaped from the Latin *anima* meaning “breath”. It is widely used to describe the way tribal and Indigenous peoples view the world and choose to live within it. A widely quoted definition is: “Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others.”¹ An exciting observation, emphasizing “living in relationship” with everything; this connects exactly with Jesus’ message of *shalom* where all things live and move in dynamic harmony with one another.

My personal definition would be: animism believes that everything that exists is both alive and sacred, with all things being interconnected and related: that the Earth, along with each animal, plant, seemingly inert object and natural phenomena are persons (or potentially so); a community of Creation requiring harmonious relationships between humans, their ancestors and wild nature, nurtured by respectful and sustainable lifeways. I believe every global Indigenous community would broadly accept this; it is also fundamentally biblical, at the heart of Jesus’ worldview, and should be ours as well. Jesus examples this Animist way, building on early biblical insights:



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- *Everything is alive ... everything is person ...* Jesus says, “Rocks may cry out”, “Mountains may move”, “Consider flowers and birds and learn from them”. Winds and waves are obedient, “yet the wind blows where it wills”. Here living consciousness, volition and personhood are each understood to be present. (Lk 19:40; Mk 11:23; Lk 12:27; Mk 4:41; Jn 3:8).
- *Everything is sacred ...* Jesus’ incarnation doesn’t make everything sacred, rather declares it already is! His words about bread and wine emphasise this. “This is my body-blood”, is neither magical nor symbolic, but a statement of fact about reality (Mk 14:22-25).
- *Everything is connected ...* Jesus’ message was *shalom*, which means the harmonious interconnectedness of absolutely everything; God’s kingdom fully expressed (Lk 10:5,90).
- *Everything is nurtured ...* God sends the rain and the sun for growth. Clothes the grass, feeds the birds, with none of them dying without divine concern.
- *Everything is respected ...* Jesus said, “Love your neighbour as yourself”. Respect begins with love, and Jesus makes it clear every “person” we encounter – human or other-than-human – is in fact our neighbour.

This is a call to think differently about the world, how we understand it, and choose to live within it.

Today’s global ecological crisis is first and foremost a spiritual crisis. Yes, personal, social and political strategies are urgent; however, we simply will not see the deep long-term sustained and necessary transformations, without making spirituality foundational. Spirituality is at the heart of Christian Animism, with ecology central to our mission. Jesus says, “Proclaim the good news to the whole Creation” (Mk 16:15). Ours must be a distinctive voice at the centre of global eco-spiritual conversation and action. While Christian Animism touches everything, I will end with just three thoughts:

It challenges dualism, calling us to live by shalom. Dualism divides understanding into two opposed or contrasting aspects. It has no biblical basis, yet has plagued Christian thinking for more than 1500 years. Crudely, Christian dualism argues heaven is the dwelling place of God, and that is our ultimate destiny; this Earth and cosmos will be destroyed by fire, replaced by another new Heaven and Earth, and so care for this environment is meaningless, it is here to be exploited.² The central biblical concept of reality, *shalom*, challenges this. Usually translated “peace”, more accurately it denotes wholeness, integratedness, and completeness: everything — physical-spiritual — moving together in dynamic harmony. *Shalom* is the message of

Jesus, identical to the “kingdom of God”; it is our message too. (See Isa 9:7; Lk 10:5, 11; Acts 10:36; Eph 2:17 et al) *Shalom* is about all relationships, and proclaims Creation’s destiny. No one is going to heaven! We will all be part of a *renewed* (not new) Creation, not somewhere else but *here*.³ *Shalom* works for the physical wellbeing of all things without exception, challenging injustice in all its forms.

It challenges dominion, calling us to live by meekness. The single most ecologically destructive biblical idea believes God gave humans “*dominion* over the Earth”. (Gen 1:26,28) This traditional translation and interpretation is simply wrong. The Hebrew phrase *v’yirdu* can mean “*dominion with*”, but never “*over*”.⁴ Living in God’s image, we are called to companionship *with* Creation, living *with* Creation in *shalom*. This word “*with*” is the most ecologically-significant word in scripture! Jesus interprets *dominion* using “*meekness*” saying, “The meek shall inherit the earth”. A true biblical understanding of meekness suggests three seemingly incompatible ideas, in a single concept:⁵

- Selfless anger against injustice
- Serene poise and self-control
- Simple gentleness and compassion

Jesus embodies these, for example in stilling the storm and riding an ungentled donkey-foal, and teaching of flowers and birds as examples of God’s character and love.

It calls us to nurture our connection with nature. We begin by opening our senses to the natural world. Then we begin to observe and learn from nature: “Ask the animals and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you” (Job 12:7-8). Finally, we build life-giving relationships with Creation: “you shall not fear the wild animals of the Earth; for you shall be in covenant *with* the stones of the wilderness, and the wild animals shall be in *shalom with* you” (Job 5:22-23). ■

References:

1 Harvey G, ‘*Animism: Respecting the Living World*’, Hurst & Company 2005; xi
 2 A misinterpretation of passages like Jn14:2; Lk 23:43; 2Pt 3:7,12-13 and many more
 3 Peace / *shalom* on Earth (Isa 11:6-9; Lk 2:14), New Jerusalem comes down to Earth (Rev 21:2)
 4 See Douglas-Klotz N. 2003, *The Genesis Meditations: a shared practice of peace for Christians, Jews and Muslims*, Quest Books
 5 See F Hauck and S Schulz, 1968, ‘Prau’s’ in Kittel G and Friedrich G (eds), ‘*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*’, Eerdmans; and Barclay W. 1956, ‘*Gospel of Matthew (Vol 1) The Daily Study Bible*, St Andrew Press, Edinburgh; 91-93



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