

Consider the Lilies of the Field

Reading Luke's Gospel and Saving the Planet

Mary Grey uncovers texts which offer clues and potential for transformation

Introduction

Consider the lilies: these flowers that look like anemones are from the grounds of Tantur Ecumenical Institute, Jerusalem. Whether they are in truth the biblical lilies or not, they are flowers of beauty, springing up every year in the awakening of spring with a vibrant splash of colour. Jesus singles them out in the Gospels of both Luke and Matthew. But why 'Consider the lilies' in this time of crisis of climate change? What possible clue could be gained from reflecting on a civilisation whose ecological footprint was far lighter than ours?

1. Why choose Luke?

We read scriptural texts now with greater awareness of their context and the gap between that and our own, knowing that the authors of the texts brought needs and questions to their stories and memories, and wrote the texts as answers to their communities' needs. We are now reading sacred texts at a time of an unprecedented, worsening ecological crisis. Our problem is the will to act and to put effective policies into practice. Sacred texts will not give us direct answers, but offer clues, and resources for change. They recall us to the sacred God-given trust we have been given with regard to the Earth.

Luke's Gospel is a text that Christians love and could regard as a journey companion on the quest for transformation. The journey theme is central to Luke, who is writing about a poor peasant community, yet for rich landowners, as well as city dwellers, so his view of social harmony is closely linked with a just land ethic. Luke offers resources for a Liberation Theology in the context of climate change. In our present crisis, nature, the Earth and her exploited resources have become the new category of poverty.¹ Nature is the new poor. Finally, Luke's Gospel is a Gospel of peace. From the angels' song at Christmas to the greeting of the Easter Jesus, 'Peace be with you', this is Luke's intent: so now I suggest a re-reading of Luke with *reconciliation with the Earth* as our hope.

2. The Nazareth manifesto

Let us follow Luke's invitation to re-visit Nazareth, and listen to his Nazareth manifesto (Luke 4.18-30). Into the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth enters the young Rabbi Jesus. He is given the scroll and it falls open at the reading for the day, Isaiah 61.1-7:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me to preach
the good news to the poor ...

Luke could never have envisaged the impact this text would continue to have as an agenda for Liberation Theology. The late Michael Prior read it as a text inspiring a new revolutionary order:

The New Order inaugurated by Jesus of Nazareth, will not be brought in by the rhetoric of the most eloquent of liberation theologians alone. In contemporary society, the evangelisation of the poor will come about only through the combined efforts of competent people who share the vision of Jesus.²

Can we read it now in our own crisis to inspire action for change and climate justice?

3. Jesus as a landless prophet and the situation of Palestine today

What were the issues for Jesus and the Lukan community around justice for the Earth? Even though this was a community treading lightly on the Earth compared with us, ecological justice was far from the case. Well-being has always included humans and non-humans alike in their environment. And this has always been vulnerable to exploitation. Luke portrays Jesus as inheriting the prophetic dreams, for example, of Isaiah, as the Nazareth manifesto has shown us. Isaiah, chapter 11, speaks of the great messianic vision of harmony with creation, to include all animals in the peaceable kingdom; this is the context of a culture of peace: the ideal that swords be turned into ploughshares.³ Edward Echlin gives an imaginative picture of the ecology of Palestine in the time of Jesus, evoking the creatures of the desert, the diversity of birds, dogs and foxes, goats, water creatures and snakes.⁴ All of these, the soil and animal communities, cry out for justice.

But how did the Lukan Jesus relate to this richness of landscape and how did it shape his faith in God? Jesus was mostly addressing poor farmers, hirelings of the Romans, landless people, dependent on having a day's work in the vineyard, in the wheat fields, in the olive groves or labouring all night to catch a few fish in the Sea of Galilee, or being swineherds for the pork destined for the tables of the Roman occupier. There is a link between poverty and people's connections with the Earth. There are parallels between 1st century



Palestine and contemporary rural Rajasthan (North West India), where people are poor through a mixture of the harsh conditions of the desert – experiencing both drought and floods, caste-based poverty, the consequences of colonisation and unjust local rulers as well as the dangers of racial violence or bandits (the robbers on the road to Jericho come to mind). Failure of the harvest brings famine and over-reliance on the money lender: because debt spirals out of control, people are forced to sell themselves as bonded labourers for a lifetime, even passing on the debt to their children. For women it is prostitution or being trafficked. It is no accident that the Lukan Jesus has many stories about debt. For poor people simply getting enough to eat was the main problem. Meat was rare and those who could not afford wheat or meat ate barley bread, and were often reduced to eating locusts and other domestic animals. The non-existence of medical care for poor people in the time of Jesus is part of the reason that the sick flocked to Jesus in hope of healing. But the biggest contrast between rich and poor is in terms of security. The rich can afford to prepare for the lean years by storing grain in barns (Luke 12.16-21). Their houses are proof against storms and floods. They wear clothing both beautiful and warm – as we see from the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16.19-21). The point to be stressed is: first, the basis of life was the organic connection between nature, well-being of people and all life-forms. This is *still* the basis of life but we, in our comfort zones, have concealed it through false expectations: that supermarkets will deliver what we want to eat throughout the entire year; that houses will continue to be warmed by fossil fuels; and that environmental problems can be confined to the poor southern countries. *No more*. Of course, the problem of global warming did not exist then, but the inability to tackle it effectively *now* is paralleled by the divisions of rich and poor in New Testament times; and the unwillingness of the rich to change their lifestyles to allow poor people to have the barest level of dignified humanity, constituted the same kind of barrier as now.

Looking at Palestine/Israel today, a worse picture of environmental woe exists, exacerbated by politics. In the narrative of poverty of the 1st century, the focus was on food, clothing, housing and curing of serious illness; the focus today is more strikingly on

Luke's is a message of urgency. Action has to be now



issues of water and land but also on food and housing. Lack of water and poor quality of water is now recognised globally as the most important cause of poor health, illness and child mortality. We know how important land was for Jesus: Palestinian environmentalist, Hwaa Irfan, writes of the same strong organic relationship today,

between a land and its people generation after generation. The respect for and the understanding of their ecosystem shape their lives. When respected, the environment is the source of well-being, but when abused it becomes the source of ill health and discord.⁵

Land is crucial to the Palestinian economy. During the Intifada, Israeli forces uprooted acres of olive trees, grapevines, palm trees, almonds, oranges, figs, strawberries, guava and bananas. The grief that this caused can scarcely be described. Palestinians now have no sovereignty and limited access to the region's natural resources. Because of the Israeli occupation and expansion, Palestine now suffers from a weakened agricultural system, wastewater, solid waste pollution problems and water security issues. This brief snapshot of land in the West Bank that the Jesus knew well indicates that climate change can bring worse suffering where reconciliation and justice with the Earth are blocked by the political situation.

4. Reading Luke and saving the planet

So, how does reading Luke affect the

agenda of global warming? If we see *the Earth* metaphorically as the *Body of God* – then Jesus is this body in which we dwell, this dream enfleshed. In Jesus' ministry, we see a focus on bodies – they matter, their health, well-being and flourishing matter. What is more, the Christic body focuses on the most poor, underfed, vulnerable and rejected bodies. Now, the threatened Earth herself, the cosmic Body, is the concern of ministry.

First, Luke focuses on peace between heaven and Earth. Not only did the angels sing of peace on the Earth,⁶ suggesting that a peace that could once only be thought of as in heaven, can now be sought through reconciliation with the Earth,⁶ but there is a hint of this in Jesus' triumphal ride into Jerusalem (Luke 19.38), followed by his weeping over Jerusalem – 'Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!' Luke's is a Gospel of non-violence: the Lukan Jesus will not conquer with the sword.

Second, Luke's is a message of urgency. Action has to be now. Zaccheus (Luke 19) is told, 'Today salvation has come to your house.' But only when he has given back what he has taken unjustly, fourfold! There is no easy way for us to pay back instantaneously the damage we have inflicted on air and sea through over-production of greenhouses gases: we can only begin the payback process, but *today!*

Third, in case we are on the verge of despair, Luke's Gospel is one of

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perseverance and prayer. The story of the unjust judge and the widow comes to mind (Luke 18.1-8). Palestinians today are developing a spirituality, that of *sumud*, or steadfastness. Even if there seems no solution, not even any hope, keep doing what you know is right. Your course of action is one for the long haul. Take a long breath.

Fourth, Luke's Gospel spells out the spirituality of sacrificial lifestyle needed for climate change. Radical simplicity is its key:

Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics. (Luke 9.3)

Mostly, tradition weakens these commands. They are not for us, goes the dismissive thinking, only for the radical ascetics, who, through the ages, have come back to this text and followed its inspiration – St Francis, for example. But now, we do not have a choice. Lifestyle movements for three decades have been urging this message upon us. Slowly we begin to heed it. We do care about food miles (and air miles). We are in process of educating ourselves not to need strawberries in January, and are committed to Fair Trade. But there is a very long way to go. In our country we can still make choices – but boatloads of refugees tell us that for many countries there are no choices for poor people and life is unsustainable. This Lukan text stands as a challenge – what more will we let go of, to make life on Earth sustainable for the most vulnerable people?

Next, Luke's Gospel is one of hospitality and welcome. Jesus' birth is announced to poor shepherds – shepherds were a despised trade in New Testament times. They are welcomed in a poor home. Jesus and his followers depend on hospitality wherever they go. But this is not just an ethic for the missionary journeys, or a reference to Middle-eastern hospitality, vital though this is. The messianic vision of peace is not far away. Peace is reconciliation with the Earth. Peace means reverencing the Earth's hospitality that we have abused. Scripture is redolent with texts and poetry extolling the hospitality of the Earth, which is of course the hospitality of God. The next point is that Jesus is incarnate as the wisdom of God and still present in Spirit today. Luke presents him full of organic wisdom and the project of the coming Kingdom was described in natural images: the Kingdom of God is like ... We miss the point if we think that he chose the mustard seed, the ravens, the lilies or the vineyards only because he lived in a rural idyll. These images form an organic part of the body of the whole. Wisdom literature is clear that the fish of the sea, like the birds of the air, are our teachers (see Job 12).

The Spirit need not be imaged as gentle dove, but as The Wild Bird who heals

The organic worldview of the Bible does not have to be seen as naive, pre-industrial romanticism. Some of the same tensions between rich and poor are present today. The parables and healings of Jesus are more than charming stories: they destabilise the mighty, remove false authority from the powerful and offer liberation from oppressive hierarchies. Recalled to the wisdom-inspired, organic, interconnected world view we cannot go back to the market-dominated one: *it can never be business as usual*. We need a biblically based economics of care, strong enough, for example, to oppose the airlines who tell us that although flight numbers have dropped slightly, when the economy picks up, things will return to normal ...!

There are two final lessons from Luke. The journeying Jesus sets his face for Jerusalem and a violent death. The Gospels cite many passages of coming tribulations: Jesus puts this into the context of the persecution his followers would undergo – yet they would be comforted and strengthened in their resistance. *The spirituality of steadfastness again*. An invitation to us, to stand firm in our chosen path of resistance to ecocidal policies. Jesus did go forward to the Garden of Gethsemane and he was comforted by an angel. Luke's Gospel is redolent with encouragement that God's love is with those who carry the cross with Jesus, which, today, is planted in those places of greatest suffering, such as standing in the path of a tsunami, a hurricane, or in a flimsy boat on the ocean.

This is not to glorify suffering but to assert that the deliberately chosen path of suffering cannot be ignored – for the sake of the preservation of the delicately interwoven ecosystems and the survival of the planet.⁷

Finally, Luke has a special drama for the Spirit. Jesus is conceived, baptised in the Spirit and then, full of the power of the Spirit, returns to Nazareth. And then silence. Until, after the resurrection, the Spirit is poured out to all the faithful followers (Acts 2). And in today's crisis the Spirit is our guide and inspirer as we are encouraged to speak with truth and not denial about global warming. The Spirit encourages imagination, that we think and imagine another way of being. I think of the creativity of Operation Noah launching the Ark on the River Thames!

The Spirit need not today be imaged as gentle dove, but as 'The Wild Bird who heals'.⁸ She can be goose, swan, even eagle or bird of prey, arising in many spiritualities today in an inter-religious perspective. This is the Spirit calling us to protect the wildernesses and the diversity of creatures that live there. This is a new revelation of the Spirit as the green face of God, as the 'Wild Bird who heals', renewing the face of the Earth – more literally than the psalmist meant it!

The gentle doctor has one more message; Luke's Gospel is often called the Gospel of the heart: the Lukan Jesus wants to cast fire on the Earth (12.49), but it is a fire for justice for the vulnerable, firing our compassion for the victims of global warming. Recalling the emotions of the two disciples who met the risen Jesus at Emmaus – 'Did not our hearts burn within us?' – is it not those same burning hearts we need to commit ourselves to working for a stable Earth temperature?

Conclusion: Consider the Lilies ...

And so, we come full circle: *consider the lilies*: lilies, symbols of natural beauty, of God's providential care and symbols of nature's wisdom. The wisdom of creation – forgotten and despised through the centuries – is offered here to inspire and guide us through this crisis into God's redeemed future for *all* created life. ■

References

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3. For the relevance of Isaiah's vision today, see M. Grey (2000) *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope: Prophetic Dreams for the 21st Century*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd.
4. Edward Echlin (1999) *Earth Spirituality: Jesus at the Centre*, New Alresford: Arthur James, pp. 61–70.
5. Hwaa Irfan, 'The Environmental Impact on the Palestinian Territories', www.islamonline.net. This paragraph has paraphrased much of the valuable information of this article, which is mainly a summary of the research of the Arab Research Institute, Jerusalem (or ARIJ) of Jad Isaac and Belgian researchers.
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7. See James Alison's powerful discussion of society's complicity in these violence cycles: *Faith beyond Resentment* (2001) London: Darton, Longman & Todd.
8. See Mark Wallace (1996) *Fragments of the Spirit*, New York: Continuum.

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