



Painting: The Anxiety of Saint Joseph by James Tissot 1886-1894. Brooklyn Museum

An Ecological Reading of Matthew's Gospel

In my column in February (*TM* issue 212, 2017: 20-21) I looked at the opening verse of the Gospel of Matthew 1:1: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christos, son of David, son of Abraham.” I noted that the phrase “book of the genealogy” appears first in the biblical narrative in Gen 2:4 where it refers to the genealogy of the “heavens and the earth”, the cosmos. It is not until Gen 5:1-2 that we find reference to the “book of the genealogy” of the human community, male and female. So the very beginning of the Matthean Gospel sets the story of Jesus, the one named “the human one” (Mt 9:6; 10:23; 11:19; 12:8, 40 and elsewhere), not only within the human story but also within the story of the cosmic and Earth communities. This story is constantly expanding, capturing our imaginations and our very being in new ways. It seems appropriate then at the end of 2017, and in this time of Advent, to turn our ecological lens on the story of the birth of Jesus Christos.

The Matthean genealogy repeats

39 times that *male* (eg, Abraham) engendered/gave birth to *male* (eg, Isaac). This obscures the pregnant female body that embraces and sustains each one born in the genealogy. And even more, this patrilineage obscures myriad Earth processes. The Matthean narrative re-turns readers to the materiality of pregnancy and birth in Mt 1:18 which opens with the words: “The birth of Jesus took place in this way”. As this verse unfolds — “when his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” — material and socio-cultural elements intertwine.

The salvation promised in the birth of this child can also be envisaged ecologically.

We find the betrothal period of Jewish law is the temporal setting of Mt 1:18-25 and it points to the future potential of a shared physical space for Joseph and Mary: “before they lived together”. Time and space, two keys to the ecological, play within this opening verse.

Other aspects of habitat seem shadowy or almost absent in the story.

But the materiality of pregnancy is not shadowy or absent: Mary has a child in her womb (*en gastri echousa*). The gestating child has a habitat—*en gastri*, in the womb, in the body of the woman Mary, his mother.

Anne Elvey has drawn attention to the significance of the pregnant body in her writing. She claims evocatively that the birth of the child from the pregnant woman also evokes the birth of the mother. In the Matthean narrative, *mētēr*/mother occurs first in Mt 1:18 in relation to the *genesis* of Jesus when both the mother (Mary) and the child (Jesus) are born in and through their interconnectedness with/in the pregnant body. Almost before readers can appreciate the materiality of this pregnancy and the birth of Mary as mother, however, the Matthean narrator inserts the phrase *ek pneumatos hagiou* (Mt 1:18, 20 — from, out of, or by a spirit that is holy), to describe the genesis of Jesus.

The Australian eco-theologian, Denis Edwards, envisions this Spirit that is holy as the one “breathing life into the universe in all its stages: into its laws and initial conditions, its origin and its evolution”. It is this Spirit that links the birth of the human Jesus to all other births, not only of human

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births but of the more-than-human or Earth constituents, in the ongoing becoming of what is new. Therefore, in this view, the Spirit can be linked to the genealogy of the heavens/sky and the Earth in its unfolding over billions of years and through multiple processes. This same Spirit is also intimately connected to the unfolding of the male and female genealogy and to Jesus' particular birth in the story. Habitat, human and the holy are intertwined. If we can read our gospel narrative in this way then it, in turn, can read us anew, shaping an ecological consciousness.

recognises a particular moment in the unfolding of the Earth story in and through which traces of the divine are revealed in a particular human/earthed being, Jesus. G*d has been "with us" from the beginning as indicated in the opening of the genealogy. G*d is now with us, the contemporary Earth community, in and through the birth of this particular child in all his materiality and his con-textuality within a web of multiple interrelationships.

The Gospel of Matthew ends on a similar note when the risen Jesus promises the disciples to "be with you" to the

Matthew 1: 18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he

had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord

through the prophet: 23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of God commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (NRSV)

The repetition of the phrase *ek pneumatou hagiou*/from, out of, or by a spirit that is holy in Mt 1:20 turns the reader from the materiality of betrothal, pregnancy and potential birth, to the divine purpose of this birth conveyed in the words of an angel: "He will save this people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). We usually read the theme of salvation/saving in the biblical narrative from either a human or a divine perspective — political and prophetic characters such as Moses, Joshua and Isaiah are potential saviours of Israel who rescue the people from oppressors. Likewise the Divine Saviour rescues socio-politically and also from what is named as sin. An ecological reader will bring new questions to this theme.

It is not difficult to imagine these questions as the language of "saving" threads through our ecological consciousness and our ecological networks and communities. We speak of *saving* species from extinction, *saving* old-growth forests from logging for purely economic gains, or saving planet Earth from the ravages of the human community. This violence and destruction can be named as "sin" in our times. Jesus, whom the angel proclaims as "saving this people from their sins", can be understood and interpreted as permeating not only social, cultural and political processes towards transforming newness. Such saving can be and needs also to be read in relation to what we now name as ecological sins so that the *salvation* promised in the birth of this child can also be envisaged ecologically. The Earth and the cosmos participate in the saving transformation that we so often limit to humankind.

Such an expanded consciousness can also inform our reading of Isaiah's text quoted in Mt 1:23: "Look, the virgin/the young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us'"

G*d is with "us", Earth and all Earth's constituents within the cosmos. This evocation is not of a particular geographical, historical, political and economic community but of all who participate in the biotic and abiotic cosmic community within the context of a new ecological awareness. The Matthean depiction of Jesus as "G*d with us"

"end of the age" (Mt 28:20). As in Mt 1:23 the "you" like the "us" need not be limited to the human community. Rather, it can extend to the entire Earth community and beyond to the all that is in the cosmos. What an extraordinary vision the opening and closing of the Gospel of Matthew can offer to those whose eyes are becoming open to the ecological, to the cosmic ✨

[Ed] This is Elaine's last column of an ecological reading of the Gospels. She will continue to write for Tui Motu on occasion.

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