

An Ecological Reading of Matthew's Gospel

Matthew 16:13-20 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Human One is?"¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say

that I am?"¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the

gates of Hades will not prevail against it.¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

As readers, we come to the Gospel text and read it, paying attention to the human and the holy and their interrelationship. But as ecological readers, we bring a new lens. As well as attending to the holy and the human we also take note of the *habitat*. Habitat is the rich interrelationship of the other-than-human and the human as these are woven together in the gospel story. As we read habitat (which includes the human) and the holy in the gospel text, we'll find we become more attentive to them in our world. We're then caught up in the spiralling process of meaning-making. This attentiveness is essential for the ecological conversion to which Pope Francis is calling us. And his call, in its turn, echoes that of John the Baptist and Jesus in Matthew's gospel: "Repent" (Mt 3:2; 4:17) — change your way of seeing, your way of being in this world.

Habitat Holds a Key

This article focuses on Matthew 16:13-16 and like so many of the discrete segments of the Gospel narrative, begins with a reference

to time and to place, grounding the Gospel in habitat. The participle "coming" in Mt 16:13 locates the story in the present time of the gospel narrative and also directs the reader's gaze to a particular place — Caesarea Philippi. The attentive ecological reader will notice that Jesus does not go into the Roman city of Caesarea Philippi but only into the region.

The city was symbolic of the Roman Empire and had an array of religious traditions with temples to Pan, Zeus and Augustus to name but three. It symbolised the *basileia*/empire of Rome and its structures of power against which Jesus was preaching an alternative: a *basileia*/an empire of the heavens or of the skies (See Mt 3:2; 4:17: "Repent for the *basileia* of the heavens/skies is near at hand"). This *basileia* was to be a new community in which human and material resources were to be shared and people were to live in right relationship with those resources, with one another and with God.

Jesus' foray into the "region" rather than the city of Caesarea Philippi would have brought him and his disciples into the area from which the Jordan River rose. It was and is a place of springs bubbling up with fresh life-giving and life-sustaining water, a very different place from the built-up environment of the city of Caesarea Philippi. It is a place where habitat, human

and holy play intimately with one another and provide an opening for Jesus' conversation with those accompanying him on his journey of preaching, teaching and healing (Mt 4:23; 9:35).

The Questions

At the level of the narrative, Jesus' questioning of his disciples is poignant in light of all the time he has spent with them and the crowds. They have accompanied or encountered him preaching, teaching and healing — but now, Jesus steps back from that activity momentarily, and begins an intimate conversation with those named disciples.

He asks them: "Who do the *anthrōpoi*/the human ones say the Son of Humanity/the Human One/*uion tou anthrōpou* is? Who is this who has entered into the Earth community as *anthrōpos*/human one among all Earth's beings?"⁸

The disciples, who have been with Jesus throughout his ministry and have heard the crowd's claims, answer: "He is a prophet" and some even identify him with John the Baptist, Elijah or Jeremiah. And they are right, Jesus has shown himself to be in the line of Israel's prophets, critiquing what is not of God, not of the *basileia* of the heavens and calling for a *metanoia*, a change in their way of being in the Earth community.

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The Jordan River

Continuing this intimate exchange, Jesus then asks his close followers how they name him; he who is human one and prophet. Peter responds on their behalf: “You are the *Messiah*/the anointed one, the one who reveals to us the living God.

Peter’s proclamation is an affirmation of who Jesus is in relation to God and the entire Earth community. He has been acclaimed by God following his baptism, his going down into the waters of creation, the waters of planet Earth and its becoming: “This is the one in whom I am revealed, the beloved in whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17). Jesus has also been affirmed by the gospel narrator in Mt 1:23 as the one who is *Emmanuel*/God with us. We have read these affirmations in terms of the human and the holy. Our invitation now is to read and hear Peter’s words echoing from a profound interrelationship of habitat (including the human) and the holy, to open the text in new ways.

Opening New Insights

Our reading from the perspective that links God, God’s anointed one, and the Earth community in a right ordering, is not confined to contemporary meaning-making and ecological reading. We read in Psalm 72 the psalmist praying for the justice and the right ordering that will characterise the era of God’s anointed, in language and images that could be those of contemporary prophets and psalmists of ecological justice. By way of example:

*May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.
May he [the Messiah] defend the cause of the poor of
the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor . . .
May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth.
In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is no more . . .
For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.
From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight (Ps 72:3–14).*

This is the righteousness, the right ordering that Jesus preaches and enacts in the Matthean Gospel. Jesus’

baptism by John “fulfills all righteousness” (Mt 3:15) which is a key characteristic of the *basileia* that he preaches, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33). It is all of this and more that is caught up in Peter’s affirmation: “You are the *Messiah*/anointed one, the one born of the living God.”

Hearing the Questions Today

We could argue that it is in the very interaction of the human community around Jesus (his disciples) in the habitat in and through which they have journeyed (the place of springs of living water) that Peter has come to his recognition of Jesus’ unique and intimate relationship with divinity.

It is in such places and among such people today that we will come to a new recognition of Jesus for our time, a time of profound ecological crises.

We are invited to answer the question: Who do we say that Jesus is and what will this ask of us? ■



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