



An Ecological Reading of Matthew's Gospel

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT provides ecological insights into each of the Sunday gospel readings during September, the Season of Creation.

September has been designated by many Churches and Christian traditions as the Season of Creation in the liturgical year. In 1989 Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of the world Orthodox Christian community, proclaimed 1 September as the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation and many other Christian Churches have joined in this tradition. Pope Francis officially recognised 1 September as the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation within the Catholic Church in 2015 and in 2016 he invited Catholics to join in the celebration of the liturgical Season of Creation beginning on 1 September and ending on 4 October (Feast of St Francis of Assisi).

In this article I will explore the gospel readings for the four Sundays of the Season of Creation (3, 10, 17 and 24 September). They are all from Matthew's Gospel and my points will necessarily be brief. This Season of Creation is an opportune time to bring our growing ecological consciousness to all our scriptural readings as well as our liturgy as a whole.

3 Sept – Matthew 16:21-27

In the Matthean story of Jesus the verses Mt 16: 21–27 follow after the Caesarea Philippi incident that we read in *TM* August 2017. As we noted, the location “was/is a place where habitat, human and holy play intimately with one another and provide an opening for Jesus to converse with those accompanying him on his journey of preaching, teaching and healing” (Mt 4:23; 9:35). That conversation turns in Mt 16:21ff. It marks a new time: the moment from which Jesus turns his

attention to Jerusalem. That city, in its turn, becomes a new spatial element in the unfolding narrative. Time and space, those key elements in an ecological reading, continually weave through the Gospel.

The ecological reader will recognise the cycle of life-death-life that Jesus sees ahead of him. Peter, on the other hand, rebukes Jesus for his acceptance of this process and thereby draws one of the strongest rebukes we hear from Jesus: “Get behind me, Satan.” This exchange invites and even challenges us to attend profoundly to all life's processes in which we are embedded. It also sounds as a rebuke to us, the human community, when we seek to set ourselves apart from such processes.

10 Sept – Matthew 18:15-20

Matthew 18 is often designated the “Community Discourse”. This is important to note as community for ecological readers includes

Elaine Wainwright RSM is a biblical scholar and the Executive Director of Mission and Ministry for the Mercy Sisters in Australia and Papua New Guinea.



humans and more-than-human. Mt 18:15-20 invites readers into a process of reconciliation necessary when there is a breakdown in relationships in the emerging gospel communities. We usually understand and read these relationships very explicitly as within the human community with the speaker being a member of that community. However, a way of reading this text ecologically could be to give voice imaginatively to the other-than-human who is offended against. This can expand our consciousness.

And so we might begin: "If your brother or sister in the human community sins against you, an other-than-human one (water, animal, soil...), go and point out the fault when you are alone. If the human one listens to you, you have regained a brother or sister. But if you are not listened to take one or two others from the other-than-human community with you so that every word may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If the offending human refuses to listen to these witnesses take it to the assembly of the Earth community and if the assembly is ignored then that person puts themselves outside the Earth community."

Attention must be given to the other-than-human as this is where we will hear the voice of the God, who is with us in Jesus (see Mt 1:23 and 18:20) at this time.

Such a retelling challenges our imagination in relation to how we listen to or engage with the other-than-human with whom we are in community as much as with other humans. The Season of Creation may be a time for such creative imagining of our biblical tradition including our Gospels. This, in turn, may assist in the expanding of our consciousness just as the Jesus story expanded Jewish religious consciousness in the first century.

17 September – Matthew 18:21-35

Matthew 18:21-35 is difficult from a number of perspectives including the ecological. It deals with the challenging issue of forgiveness which cannot be limited to Peter's proposal of seven times but rather must be 70 times seven, or 70 times and seven, either of which is infinite.

We are aware that the breakdown of relationships that need forgiveness is not confined to human relationships but can be extended to those between the human and other-than-human. Natural forces such as wind and rain, movements of earth and fire can very quickly destroy human communities. What is the forgiveness that these call from human communities? And we are also aware of the ways in which the human community has destroyed and disrupted the ecology of Earth. Forgiveness must be mutual and infinite and it needs to be learnt. This is what the difficult parable Mt 18:23-37 wants to teach. However, it is necessary to read against the grain of the violence encoded in it. This, too, is to be read ecologically.

24 September – Matthew 20:1-16

The parable of the labourers (Mt 20:1-16) focuses almost exclusively on right relationships or justice within the human community. However, we can imagine the rich and

complex interrelationships of material and social features woven into this text. The vineyard itself needs the workers' attention and the owner who hires them. There are certain times of the day for the labourers to begin work and keep working. We can imagine the soil needing to be tilled, the vines heavy with grapes and the hired labourers working under the heat of the sun.

The parable hinges on the pivotal question: Is your eye evil because I am good or generous? It picks up the cultural feature of the "evil eye" associated with envy – envy in the face of the generosity of the landowner. This is an example of the socio-cultural features lying within the text. The parable challenges us to attend to the ecological clues – material, cultural and socio-political – threaded into the first-century story and to explore their significance now.

The parable is so rich in features, as the one noted above, that it readily lends itself to an ecological retelling. The Season of Creation gives us an ideal time for furthering this exploration. ■

For Season of Creation Resources see:

Uniting Church Australia website: seasonofcreation.com

Columban Mission Institute website:

[www.columban.org.au/media-and-publications/educational-resources/a-catholic-season-of-creation-sundays-of-september-\(year-a-2017\)](http://www.columban.org.au/media-and-publications/educational-resources/a-catholic-season-of-creation-sundays-of-september-(year-a-2017))

Sign up for Tui Motu "Creation Pause" daily emails:
www.tuimotu.org

MAKING A DIFFERENCE NOT A FUSS

The Society of St Vincent de Paul has flourished in New Zealand since 1867. 150 years of service, generosity and compassion, without fanfare or fuss.

It's time to celebrate the Vinnies fantastic contribution to New Zealand life. Keep this remarkable story alive by joining your local Vinnies Group and making a difference in your community. Donations to our work are very welcome – see our website for details.



Society of St Vincent de Paul

Freepost 992, PO Box 10-815, Wellington 6143
TEL: 04 499 5070 EMAIL: national@svdp.org.nz
WEB: www.svdp.org.nz