

Day of Recollection for Ministers of the Eucharist and Readers on Laudato Si'
Homily: 'Jesus came to save the Planet'

In the Gospel Jesus urges his hearers to read the signs of the times. These words were reiterated by the Second Vatican Council - the Church must respond to the situation in which we live in every generation.

Practically every day news reports point out how we are polluting the planet, strip-mining its resources, creating mega land-fills, pouring carbon dangerously into the atmosphere, causing the disappearance of thousands of species, creating bad air and bad water, thinning the ozone layer. And so the cry goes out: live more simply, reduce your carbon footprint, try to recycle whatever you have used as much as you can.

This planet is our home and we need to ensure that it can provide us with the protection, comfort and sustenance of a home. But there is another very important reason why we need to treat Mother Earth with more caution and respect: namely, Christ himself. He is vitally bound up with nature, and his reasons for coming to earth also include the intention of redeeming the physical universe.

The scientist-theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, in conversation with a Vatican official who was confused by his writings and doctrinally suspicious of them, was asked: 'What are you trying to do in your writings?' Teilhard's response was: 'I am trying to write a Christology that is wide enough to incorporate the full Christ, because Christ is not just an anthropological event but he is also a cosmic phenomenon'. Put simply, he was saying that Christ didn't just come to save people, he also came to save the planet, of which people are only one part.

Teilhard had solid Scriptural backing for saying that. For example, the ancient Christian hymn which features in the passage from the Epistle to the Colossians (which was our first Mass Reading) affirms that Christ was already a vital force inside the original creation - 'all things were made through him' - and Christ is the end point of all history, human and cosmic.

The Epistle to the Ephesians, which also records an ancient Christian hymn, makes the same point (1:3-10). The Epistle to the Romans (8:19-22) is even more explicit when it affirms that the creation, Mother Earth, and our physical universe are 'groaning' as they too wait for redemption by Christ. Among other things, these texts affirm that the physical world is part of God's plan for eventual heavenly life.

If we tease out the implications of that then a number of clear principles emerge.

First, nature, not just humanity, is being redeemed by Christ. The world is not just a stage upon which human history plays out; it also has intrinsic meaning and value beyond what it means for us as human beings. Physical nature is, in effect, brother and sister with us in the journey towards the divinely intended end of history.

St Francis of Assisi appreciated that very much and expressed this belief in his hymn *Laudato Si'* - which has become the title and the theme of Pope Francis' Encyclical.

Second, these texts suggest that nature has intrinsic rights, not just the rights we find convenient to accord it. What this means is that defacing or abusing nature is not just a legal or an environmental issue, it's a moral one. We are violating someone's, something's intrinsic rights.

Of course, there will be those who argue that only a moral person - such as a human being - has rights, but others go further than this and defend *animal* rights. Others, as we know, don't go far enough in the defence of human dignity as is exemplified in the case of those who allow the unborn to be discarded like trash.

Ronald Rolheiser, writing on this subject in his syndicated weekly column, declares - rather strikingly - that 'when we mindlessly throw a Coke can into a ditch we are not just breaking a law we are also, at a deeper level, defacing Christ. We need to respect nature, not, first of all, so that it doesn't recoil on us and give us back our own asphyxiating pollution, but because, akin to humanity, nature has its own rights'. ([Catholic Herald](#), 27.2.15, p43)

Finally, what is implied in understanding the cosmic dimension of Christ and what that means in terms of our relationship to Mother Earth and the universe, is the non-negotiable fact that the quest for community and consummation within God's Kingdom - i.e. our spiritual journey to heaven - is a quest that calls us not just to a proper relationship with God and with each other, but also a proper relationship with physical creation. It seems that the ancient indigenous peoples of the planet, too often dismissed as 'primitive', have all understood this better than we do.

Rolheiser concludes his reflection with these words:

'We are humans with bodies living on the earth, not disembodied angels living in heaven, and Christ came to save our bodies along with our souls. He came, too, to save the physical ground upon which we walk, since he was the very pattern upon which and through which the physical world was created'. (op.cit.)

Our Holy Father Pope Francis puts it like this:

'What is needed is an ecological conversion, whereby the effects of our encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in our relationship with the world around us. Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience....

The task of ecological conversion will make such demands upon us that we could never achieve it by individual initiative...it must be a community conversion... which calls for attitudes fostering a spirit of generous care: gratitude for God's loving gift of the world, and a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion'. (*Laudato Si'* #216ff)