

Good Friday and Earth Day

By a coincidence of our calendars, the observation of Good Friday this year will line up with the 41st celebration of Earth Day on April 22, 2011.

That they coincide gives us the opportunity to ask a vital question: What might Earth Day have to do with Good Friday? Is it a mere detail of dates? Or do they mutually inform each other, give greater meaning to each by sharing the space?

Faithful answers could certainly roam far and wide in answering this question. But we need not go to mystical extremes to trace a connection between a suffering world and Christ crucified. In fact, the most radical (in the original sense of *radix*) fruits of the alignment grow right out of the root of our faith. Perhaps three examples can serve as a start.

Christ as New Adam

In the creation story of Genesis 2, God forms a human from the dust of the earth. In Hebrew, this is *adam* taken out of *adamah*. Similarly in English, the connections between “human” and “humus” remind us we are earth-creatures. In our funeral liturgies, we continue to speak of the cycle of our creation from and decomposition to the soil as “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” This was also marked upon us in ash through the season of Lent, a mark already then joining us to Christ’s cross.

On the cross, this one who was “true God from true God” joins this full extent of our humanity. He who “came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became truly human” also “suffered death and was buried,” as we profess in the Creed. Christ assumed our life and its end.

Yet, in Christ we see not only a perpetuation of the old Adam, but something new that we also share; in this new Adam we too are made new Adams and Eves. “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2Cor5:17).

Although in our faith we centrally cling to this promise, sharing the embodiment of this new Adam is something we don’t yet fully comprehend. This is a “now and not yet” juxtaposition. So the great chapter of the resurrection of the dead, 1 Corinthians 15, speaks of two different kinds of bodies, a perishable and an imperishable. Paul sees a past connection to “the living being,” Adam: “the first man was from the earth, a man of dust.” He also sees a promised connection to “the last Adam.” Christ became a “man of dust” so that we might become something more.

As we think of humans and the soil, of being taken from the earth, it is probably worth noting in this chapter that Paul refers also to the new creation in terms of a seed that is dead and buried in soil. The same language is used for Christ in John 12 (the reading for Tuesday in Holy Week). We should not, then, too quickly move to a disembodied vision of heaven, of floating away from this earth. Christ was not swept up, Elijah-style in a fiery chariot to heaven, but “was crucified, died, and was buried.” Though we await the

fullness of what a resurrection body will look like, it seems it should still be thought of as necessarily rooted in the humus. Continuing to grow out from death and burial, even resurrection is part of this world! We know nothing of our God or our God's work apart from life and death on earth.

Cross as Tree of Life

In what has become the most famous Good Friday hymn, the great ancient hymnwriter, Fortunatus, wrote paradoxical words about death from life. One verse proclaims:

*Faithful cross, true sign of triumph,
be for all the noblest tree;
none in foliage, none in blossom,
none in fruit your equal be;
symbol of the world's redemption,
for your burden makes us free.* (Sing, My Tongue. tr. Neale)

This is among the many references in our hymnody to the tree of the cross. It is in part traceable in Scripture to 1 Peter 2:24: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." (That, from NIV, concludes with a connection to the Isaiah reading for Good Friday. See also Gal3:13.)

Medieval artwork portrayed this verse by showing a skull beneath the cross. The skull was Adam's. Where Adam and Eve led humanity into sin and death by eating the fruit of the tree, through the death on this tree humanity is made righteous. As a tree brought death, now a tree, in death, brings life.

That is potent enough and indeed our "true sign of triumph" so that it should probably remain the center of this piece of reflection. Yet while the tree of the hymn above excels all others, it also draws our attention to tease more out of the woodwork, so to put it. As a sacrifice brought life in Christ, we may next think about how a tree was cut down to become the "noblest" wood of Christ's cross. We may then go on similarly to trace how trees give us life in so many various ways. Sometimes it is through literal fruits, like the cultivation of apples and oranges.

Or to continue the comparisons, we may ponder where our own crosses come from, whether adorning our worship spaces or hanging around our necks as jewelry. What sort of tree provided the wood for a particular cross or where was the gold mined? What was involved in the natural processes to bring us that cross? For a tree, it could go back to water or sunlight. It might stretch back even to stellar fusion, forming gold billions of years ago in the life and death of stars. This stretches through hands of artists and manufacturers to create and shape and continue the process, all to bring us a cross as our current reminder of the tree of life.

In each ending are so many new beginnings. Through one death, we are reborn. Through many deaths, life continues. It is an ongoing flow of giving and receiving, not only in food systems and such, but cosmic in scale.

The Voice of Truth

These first two suggestions don't go out on any limbs. (Sorry! The plays on words are just too fun.) "Christ as New Adam" and "Cross as Tree of Life" are really at the root of our faith. Our purpose has been to notice there is an inevitable ecological concern at the center of these faithful concepts. Our faith is in this world. It is incarnational. It is physical. In Scripture, creed, and hymnody, this has been held at our heart since the beginning of Christian faith. Jesus, too, is an earth-creature, and his saving work was on a tree. This is the very core of who we are.

For the third suggestion, we might begin to branch out from the roots and to realize more broadly how our Good Friday faith connects us to the life of all the earth. Perhaps we can begin with some words of Jesus in the reading for Good Friday from John's Gospel: "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37).

With Christian tradition, we may connect this voice to John 1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life." When Jesus speaks, it is for life. And he himself is the Word spoken; his whole existence is for the sake of abundant life. For this he came into the world.

Those who are against Jesus, on the other hand, come "only to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). Good Friday is an occasion to reflect on what causes death in this world, what is against God's good will, and how we are complicit in it. In the confrontation with Pilate, against blindness of insidious lies that try to cover up and obscure deadliness, Jesus speaks for the truth. This is a call to awakening, to turn again away from sin, to turn to life. If we confess his death was for our sin, how do we also go on as those who listen to his voice?

Much of current environmental debate could be described as trying to awaken, to open eyes to a truth that we've ignored and tried to cover over. We have pretended that lifestyles of greedy consumption are okay, are sustainable, are not harmful to others. We have been those who steal, kill, destroy. More and more it is clear that we need a change. For the sake of life, we need to listen to the voice of truth.

Sen. Gaylord Nelson, described the push toward the original Earth Day in 1970:

What was the purpose of Earth Day? How did it start?... All across the country, evidence of environmental degradation was appearing everywhere, and everyone noticed except the political establishment. The environmental issue simply was not to be found on the nation's political agenda. The people were concerned, but the politicians were not.... I announced that in the spring of 1970 there would be a nationwide grassroots demonstration on behalf of the environment and invited everyone to participate....[Then] the American people finally had a forum to express its concern about what was happening to the land, rivers, lakes, and air - and they did so with spectacular exuberance.

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We are people who have the exuberance, the Spirit for this. It has been on our agenda since way back “in the beginning.” We can see around us everywhere the evidence of environmental degradation and climate change. We can see what leads to death, and yet we are people awakened by a call from death to new life. We have heard the voice and know the truth. For the sake of the world, for this Christ was born. For this world he died. Herein is God’s concern. Let us not accept the grace of God in vain.

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