

SPIRIT SOPHIA
and
MOTHER EARTH

The more I rack my brain about matters environmental the more I am convinced that the most important thing we need to talk about is wisdom.

Wisdom as a biblical characteristic – indeed, even a biblical figure.

Wisdom as a theological virtue.

Wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Increasingly I am seeing the Wisdom literature of the Bible as a crucial resource in facing environmental challenges. Listen to the verse from Psalm 48: “In his riches man (sic) lacks wisdom; he is like the beasts that are destroyed.”

The unbridled profit motive, the obsessive accumulation of wealth – all of which rapes the planet’s resources – is just plain stupid. That’s only another way of saying, “in his riches man lacks wisdom”!

Let’s look at Wisdom in the Bible, and especially in relation to creation. It could not be clearer than

PROVERBS 8:22-31

The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works,
before his deeds of old;
I was formed long ages ago,
at the very beginning, when the world came to be.
When there were no watery depths, I was given birth,
when there were no springs overflowing with water;
before the mountains were settled in place,
before the hills, I was given birth,
before he made the world or its fields
or any of the dust of the earth.
I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
when he gave the sea its boundary
so the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
Then I was constantly at his side.

I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in humankind.

Elizabeth Johnson, in her book *Ask the Beasts*, draws our attention to Wisdom (*Hokmah* in Hebrew – *Sophia* in Greek) as a female figure of great power and might, bringing all things to birth. Wisdom Literature's language about Sophia is a celebration of God's goodness in creating and sustaining the world. She is present with God at creation, working her craft of beauty and playfully rejoicing at the result, as we saw in the verses above from Proverbs.

The Book of Wisdom takes this up. Wisdom is connected with mobility, the falling of the dew (Eucharistic Prayer II), radiant light and many other creations. Solomon calls her the "mother of all good things" (Wis 7:12); he knows she can teach him the secrets of the natural world because she fashioned them all. Wisdom is not a distant power. She is constantly present to creation, constantly renewing the face of the earth.

For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. (Wis 7:24)

Wisdom is beautiful. That's a very important consideration as we disfigure the earth – we are destroying beauty. But let me get back to the quote:

She is more beautiful than the sun
and excels every constellation of the stars.
Compared with the light she is found to be superior,
for it is succeeded by the night.
But against wisdom evil does not prevail. (Wis 7:29-30)

She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other,
and she orders all things well. (8:1)

Gradually, Wisdom began to be associated with God's Spirit.

Who has learned your counsel,
unless you have given wisdom
and sent your holy spirit from on high. (Wis 9:17)

From the feminine noun for wisdom, it is quite easy to move onto biblical feminine images of God. When Jesus compared himself to a mother hen who wanted to protect her chicks under her wings, he was borrowing from Old Testament literature in which he was raised. The one animal more

than any other to symbolise the presence of the Spirit in the world is a bird. Think of the dove hovering over Jesus at his baptism. The psalms are full of this image, not least the verse we use in our own prayer to the Holy Spirit: Send forth your Spirit and renew the face of the earth.

Syriac Christianity, so near to the early Church, links the Holy Spirit to the image of a brooding and hovering mother bird. Beth Johnson quotes this ancient Syriac prayer:

As the wings of doves over their nestlings,
And the mouths of their nestlings towards their mouths,
So also are the wings of the Spirit over my heart.
Bring with you calm and peace,
And spread your wings over our sinful times.

St Augustine himself – even though he could be a bit of a theological misogynist at times – writes that the creative work of the Holy Spirit is like a brooding mother bird

where that warmth of the mother's body in some way also supports the forming of chicks through the influence of her own kind of love.

[Pause]

Let's briefly retrace our steps. We have moved from a biblical reflection on the virtue and gift of wisdom. We have seen it as a feminine noun, and we noted the many ways in which it carries strong allusions to the Spirit of God, not least in the Psalms and Wisdom literature. Then we pulled out from the bible the image of a brooding mother bird as an affirmation of the creative work of the Holy Spirit, hovering over the formless empty void before the creation. It is not difficult, therefore, to move into the Catholic tradition and draw on the prophetic work of St Hildegard of Bingen, one of the most recently proclaimed doctors of the Church – proclaimed such by Pope Benedict XVI.

I said prophetic. Hildegard envisioned a time when human activities would harm the Earth. "The earth sustains humanity," she wrote. "It must not be injured; it must not be destroyed." Her later writing would shift from "it" to "she" and "her" when she describes the earth as a Mother:

The earth is the Mother of all, for contained in her are the seeds of all.

Hildegard of Bingen is an early eco-warrior aware of the need to care for the earth and for how it gives us all we need. She spoke of how we are one with, part of, the earth; how we are interconnected and interdependent.

Hildegard lived in the 12th century, during a time when there was no inkling of the devastation, destruction and pollution that humans would wreak on our planet. She cherished the natural world around her. She is one of the "creation-centred" mystics, together with Francis of Assisi and Teilhard de Chardin and others. But where Francis spoke of Brother This and Sister That, about created things, and where Teilhard spoke of the "spiritual nature of matter", Hildegard preferred the image of the Earth as Mother. Let me give the full quote:

Holy persons draw to themselves all that is earthly.
The Earth is at the same time mother,
She is mother of all that is natural, mother of all that is human.
She is the mother of all, for contained in her are the seeds of all.

The plight of Mother Earth is the number one moral issue of our time – and probably numbers two and three as well, if you consider that everything is interconnected, that everything is a gift of Mother Earth, and the care of Mother Earth is *mutatis mutandis* care of the poor, the vulnerable, the worker, the unemployed, to say nothing of those subjected to war and violence. All of Catholic Social Teaching finds a locus in Mother Earth.

Mother Earth's children, dare I say it, are committing matricide. We are killing our mother. We are amputating the breasts that feed us. Thank God for the healers! Interestingly, Hildegard herself was considered to be a leading healer in her time, a pharmacist and homeopathic doctor who studied the healing properties of plants. In this sense I make the point that our environmental prophets are also healers, protecting and caring for a wounded mother.

Sometimes I think our best advocacy work as Church is not simply to *denounce*. Woe to this and woe to that! Perhaps our task is to bless, support and enhance the work of the prophets and healers in the secular domain: politicians and educators, engineers and inventors, scientists and poets, geologists and artists, parents and grandparents, clergy and business leaders.

I hate to say this, but the campaign to end slavery was *not* an initiative of the Church. For too long, the Church supported slavery. No, it was the initiative of so-called secular people, people of integrity and compassion. Likewise in the campaign to save the planet. We as Church do well to join the worldwide campaign as *fratelli e sorelle tutti* – brothers and sisters all, to use the title of Pope Francis' encyclical.

Hildegard begs us to wake up to the suffering of our Mother Earth: "The Earth must not be injured."

This is where I think we need to keep plugging the notion of stewardship, in terms of the command we humans received from God at the beginning of creation, to “subdue” the earth. I want to play on the word “subdue”. I don’t know about you, but I have had some experience in hospitals and hospices, working as a nurse orderly when I was a seminarian. Patients in great suffering and distress need to be subdued. A strong drug is sometimes given, like a sedative. But often all it needs to subdue a patient is a few gentle words, holding a hand, calming the person down. That’s what our sick Mother Earth needs now: that kind of subduing. Not subduing by domination or control but by calming through kindness.

Yet while the healing work continues, restoring Mother Earth to better health, the work of justice must also continue. By this I mean bringing to justice.

I recently read a book by Bulelwa Mabasa, “My Land Obsession”. She is an attorney with a top law firm in Johannesburg. She has been given free reign to set up a department in that firm solely dedicated to the land question, primarily post-apartheid land claims. One chapter struck me in particular: “Saving a Sacred Place for the Ancestors.” Allow me to share a couple of paragraphs:

Earlier, David [law partner] had consulted with a group of environmentalists, game-reserve owners, farmers and landowners. They were deeply concerned about an Australian-owned mine that had recently and unlawfully begun operating on a mountain known locally as the Meletse mountain. The landowners and the community had expressed their concerns and unhappiness about the possibility of Meletse mountain being desecrated by the iron-ore mine. During consultation, one of the landowners indicated that he had heard from his housekeeper that the threatened mountain ‘inhabits the spirits of our ancestors’.

My place as a Western-trained practising attorney could not lull my grounding as an African woman. The perspective and depth that I was bringing to the table were my lived experience and deep connection with the notion that our ancestors communicate with us in various dimensions. This case presented an opportunity to delve meaningfully into the significance of land not for its finite patrimonial uses, not for its economic or financial value, but for its ability to heal people and to remind them of who they are and where they come from. (Cf. pp. 192-3)

This is an aspect I had not considered before, but one which closely allies itself with environmentalists in the tension between (a) using the resources and gifts of Mother Earth for our wellbeing and (b) protecting

our Mother Earth from being stripped and raped. This is where working for justice must be seen to be an aspect of proclaiming good news.

We cannot allow minerals to be stripped from the land, life-sustaining water to be polluted, ocean life to be depleted, and companies walk away once its business is done, leaving Mother Earth abandoned, denuded, barren, poisoned. And of course, poor local people deprived of Earth's sustenance and their livelihoods, or, as we learn from Mabasa, deprived of sacred places of communing with the ancestors.

Conclusion

The Lord's is the earth and the fullness thereof. (Psalm 24:1)

To save the planet we need the mind of God its Creator. This brings us back to Wisdom. Wisdom *is* to have the *mind* of God. Wisdom delighting to be with God in the act of creation. Sophia at the origin of all things.

We need an outpouring of wisdom to touch the heart of every human being. Only wisdom will save us from annihilation. I would recommend that wisdom be the watchword in all your ministry of advocacy. Whatever the issue you may be dealing with, whatever task you may be confronting, ask the question: IS IT WISE?

Ask it of every mining venture: Is it wise?

Ask it of the fisheries: Is it wise?

Ask it of government policy: Is it wise?

And ask yourself: what is the wisest way to respond?

We need training for wisdom because right now as a human race we are just being plain stupid. We pray:

Spirit Sophia, teach us your wisdom as we work with you to renew the face of the earth!

Finally, a grace before meals (Pope Francis in LS spoke about mealtimes as opportunity to raise awareness of matters environmental):

Blessed are you, God of all creation. We thank you for the gifts of our Mother Earth who from her abundance provides this meal and all that we need. May we care for her in return.

Larry Kaufmann CSsR
27 September 2022