

The Earth is the Lord's

The Book of the Word: Reading God's creation Elizabeth Theokritoff

A philosopher once asked St Anthony, 'How do you manage, Father, deprived of the consolation of books?' Anthony replied: 'My book, O philosopher, is the nature of created things, and this is before me whenever I wish to read the words of God'.

This often-quoted saying of the father of monasticism (251-356) captures well the ancient Christian attitude to the world round us. It is not primarily a resource, nor even a trust for us to look after, but above all a means to learning the ways and will of God. The roots of this understanding go deep into the Old Testament, where 'the heavens declare the glory of God' (Ps 19:1) and Job invokes the animals, plants and fish who recognise the action of the Lord (Jb 12: 7-8).

The image of 'the book of creation' has been remarkably enduring in the Christian world, both East and West. But that very fact easily masks some dramatic changes in understanding of what sort of book it is, how we are to read it and what we may properly expect to learn from it. The divergence in the way the two 'books' are viewed has much to do with what is usually described as the 'desacralisation of nature' in the West.

St. Maximus never tires of exploring the parallels and complementarities between the two books in which the Creator Word has inscribed himself for our sake. The double revelation is for him a distinction without division: the distinction is made in order to show how very different expressions can actually be saying the same thing. Creation and Scripture (by which he means primarily the Old Testament), the natural law and the written law are equally essential for drawing near to God. They 'are of equal value and equal dignity, both of them teach the same things in complementary ways, and neither has the advantage over the other or stands in the other's shadow. Creation and Scripture alike are fulfilled in Christ, in the 'law of grace'; and the relationship between the three is so close that we may speak of a 'triple embodiment' of the Word; in Creation and in Scripture and in the Incarnation in Bethlehem.

Perhaps, the recognition of creation as charged with the words of God has the power radically to change our attitude to everything we touch. It calls us to an attitude less of stewardship than 'studentship'. *"Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not'"* (Gen 28:16).

Limiting our wants and appetites ceases to be simply a moral obligation for the sake of sharing resources more equitably and becomes the fast that prepares us for reading, placing between ourselves and the world "a wondering and respectful distance", within which space everything becomes an object of contemplation. And our reading will keep sending us back with renewed awe to the book of creation which we hold in our hands.

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