

To live in the world of nature as an ecologist is to live in a world of wounds – to probably misquote Aldo Leopold, one of the pioneering ecologists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As an ecologist one sees beauty, but also destruction, all around. That favourite plant or patch of ground which one day harboured ants milking aphids for honeydew or was a sure bet for hearing a cuckoo or a nightingale or a turtle dove is suddenly no longer there – trashed for the sake of a developer's profit or a more efficient mode of farming or a neater garden. This works also on the spiritual level where the ability to love as God loves is both a beautiful and a painful experience; heaven on earth is no sinecure but a costly experience, for one sees both the reality of love at work – a real joy when people have God and one another as their focus, a sense of peace at the wonder of it all, and a real sense of loss when people are at odds with one another or are simply suffering the natural bereavements which mortality inflicts on us every day. Opening ourselves to reality then is to really know the world as a world of wounds – for many it's easier to remain in denial, to close ourselves off to the world as it is, to the possibility that heaven on earth is both an invitation to joy, to transcendence and to suffer with, and on behalf of, others.

I wonder if we can see Stephen and Jesus in this light also, both illuminated by a sense of God's presence to us here and now and yet having then to live in a world of wounds where many would prefer not to know this, would prefer, like the members of the Sanhedrin, to live with only a preconceived notion of what the world is really like – with God and heaven at a distance and in denial of the possibility of a Messiah being present to us now. The former option seems safer because we remain in control but, letting a Messiah, or a God-like figure or God into this picture, upsets everything, is too dangerous for us to handle. Let's stick with the law and its endless possibilities – that is the volumes of commentary which can argue a case this way or that and keeps us still in control. Or worse, let's keep reality as black and white as possible so that nothing of God's ambiguity can afflict us. We're talking here perhaps of the discernment of spirits which only a person willing to surrender their judgement to God, that is to the action of the Holy Spirit, can learn to use effectively. It's a gift which comes with close attention to things as they are, with that sense of joy when God is seen to be at work forming people in love and a sense of loss when this is missing. The law itself never quite captures this, the subtlety and dynamics of it all.

But the cost is high as Aldo Leopold, Stephen and Jesus knew only too well. I just wonder whether the great sense of loss that is becoming apparent among those who know the natural world well can be seen as not only a metaphor for the spiritual loss that afflicts so many but as its corollary; what we are missing is God. And, indeed, we may be missing a trick here about the wildness, or even wilderness, of God: a God not imposing order on chaos so much as enabling us to live with the chaos that constitutes life, that makes life possible.

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