



CHRISTIAN WITNESS OF THE CLOSENESS BETWEEN GOD, MAN AND NATURE. THE INSERTION OF THE SALVIFIC MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL IN THE CULTURES OF OUR TIME

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1. Gospel on Closeness between God, Man and Nature

It is surprising how much the Gospel goes into details to tell us about the closeness between God, Man and Nature. Let us take some examples. The Gospel pays much attention to water. God created water, the rivers and the ocean. The clouds help people tell when there will be rain. Jesus taught from a boat, calmed the waves, walked on the waters and directed Peter and other Apostles to lower their nets for a catch. The seasons receive attention. They lead Jesus to speak of the signs of the times and thereby indicate that the era of the promised Messiah has arrived. The Gospel speaks of when it is dry, when it is winter, when it is cold. The planets are not forgotten. The sun, the moon and the stars get an honourable mention. Commotion among the elements, lightning and thunder are signs that will announce that the Lord is coming. The Gospel pays attention to trees. The mustard seed which grows into a large tree is presented as a sign of the coming Kingdom of God. The barren fig tree stands for the person who bears no fruit, while the vine is a symbol of the unity between Christ and his disciples. All these are images which Our Saviour used to convey instruction on the Kingdom he was inaugurating. Yet the Gospel contains other mentions of trees. Zacchaeus climbs up a sycamore to have a better view of Jesus. The crowds cut down palm branches to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem. It is the Garden of Gethsemane, with its olive trees, which is the theatre for Jesus' prayer and agony. Attention to agriculture could not be lacking. Wheat and darnel growing together show us God's patience in waiting for judgement. The fields white with harvest are a symbol of humanity waiting to be evangelised. The workers in the vineyard symbolise those called by Jesus to help spread the Good News. And bread and wine, fruits of the earth, are chosen as the elements for the Eucharistic mystery. The Gospel also shows God close to man through the use of geographical contours – hills, valleys, flat ground, mountain sides and lakesides. Animals and birds are given prominent attention: birds of the air, doves, pigeons, sparrows, foxes, lions, sheep, goats, the hen with her chickens under her wings, vultures and eagles. To many of these a profound symbolism is attached. The human being is the recipient of God's saving message and grace. The Gospel gives attention to human life in its major stages: childbirth, infancy, youth, marriage, death and burial. Different circumstances are also mentioned: poverty, riches, sickness and restored health. Jesus showed great sympathy towards the hungry, the sick, the bereaved and in general the oppressed. And he did not refuse invitations to dinner from Matthew, Zacchaeus, the Pharisee, Martha, Mary and Lazarus of Bethany, and especially the bridegroom and bride of Cana. Indeed many of his teachings and some major miracles and the institution of the Holy Eucharist took place in the context of table convivium.

2. Lessons for the Insertion of the Gospel Message in Cultures

This quick review of how the Gospel approaches man and nature does suggest to us that in our efforts to bring the saving message of the Gospel to people, we should pay close attention to their culture. Cultural realities regarding marriage and family life, celebrations of joy and sorrow, and situations of hunger and thirst, poverty and sickness, death and burial, are major events where the Gospel should meet people's culture and purify it, elevate it and bring to it the saving graces of the Redeemer. Human life on earth cannot be understood or expressed without reference to climate, seasons, trees, birds, animals, agriculture and the planets. The herald of the Gospel has to seek how the Good News of Jesus Christ can be translated into man's daily life in these realities.

3. Taking note of Creation

The traditional natural religion which is especially prevalent in parts of Africa and Asia brings man close to the land, crops, trees and the seasons. Prayer to the Creator for the correct weather to favour agriculture is often spontaneous. Inculturation should pay close attention to this healthy tradition. Shintoism takes special care over trees, rivers and hills. On visits to Japan I have found this a useful stepping-stone to speak about God the invisible Creator. It is important to note how Japan, a highly developed country, has managed to preserve this feeling for nature. Could not greater efforts be made to cultivate appreciation for natural materials for liturgical furnishings and vessels: wood, stone, clay, etc.? In societies which are highly developed scientifically and technologically it is possible that in large cities many people take little notice of the moon and the stars. Some children may see real chickens or lambs only as meat on the dining table. Pets like cats are dogs are what they generally do notice. In such situations, greater effort may be required to persuade people to take notice of the wonderful things that God has made in the sky, in forests and rivers, in hills and valleys and in all life that moves on the earth.

4. Events beyond human Control

There are frequently events that remind man that he is not in control of everything. Earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions and landslides do put man face to face with catastrophes which are not under his control. Evangelisation should come to the aid of man to help him realise his need for a transcendent God, to resist temptations to blind determinism, to see the salvific role of suffering with and through Christ, and to teach people trust in a Provident God. There is no doubt that elements of nature lend themselves to an insertion of the saving message of the Gospel in the cultures of our time.