Salvation of Soil

Edward P. Echlin

As soil organisms, people depend on other soil creatures. Biologist Thomas Lovejoy observed in a recent Reith Lecture, 'All organisms need to eat. Even green plants which use the energy of the sun have to take in nutrients to live and grow.' All earth creatures are an interdependent soil, or earth, community. While geological evidence shows that the community flourished before the arrival of humanity, people are not as expendable as 'ecological age' gaia gurus would have us believe. For especially through human hands and voices, and through sustainable cultivation, the soil community praises God in an ordered, biodiverse symphony. Sustainable horticulture in and near sustainable settlements provides a foretaste, a sign or parable, of God's awaited kingdom.

Yet we notice everywhere around us the spreading ugliness in which human beings dwell, increasingly dependent upon and dominated by cars, nowhere more evident than in the relentless sprawl around human settlements. Severed from the natural world, from farms and small gardens, people feel neither gratitude nor joy for the biodiverse soil community that includes, surrounds, and nourishes us. Whether in northwest Europe, China, India, or the American plains, chemical agribusiness and relentless construction compact, smother and erode fertile topsoil as never before in history. Developing regions aspire to the same foredoomed prosperity. In large cities, people, unaware of fragility, lack the will to restore earth's health and beauty. Wendell Berry notes, 'Most people are now fed, clothed and sheltered from sources towards which they feel no gratitude and exercise no responsibility. There is no significant urban constitution and consumer lobby or political leadership for good farming and forestry, for restoration of abused land or for halting the destruction of land by so-called development.'

As a Methodist farmer, Berry might add that Christian faith and hope in salvation is not confined to separated souls, but includes the whole soil community within which people are embedded bodily persons with unique responsibility, under God, for the whole soil community's praise of God and well being. For salvation of *souls*, I suggest we should read *soil*. If, as Newman realised, the Church would look strange without the laity, so, we may add, would salvation of embedded soil creatures be strange without the soil. Increasingly people ask if the earth is included in

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'heaven', if 'the world' God so loved includes the earth, if the whole soil community shares our future, if we and our planet go together into God's peace or not. These buzzing questions may not find *explicit* answers in our creeds, codes, and cult. But the soil community is there, often in small print and between the lines, awaiting our imaginative rediscovery. As John Macquarrie said in his inaugural lecture, on ecology, at Christ Church, Oxford: 'The theologian will make his contribution by looking again at the Christian tradition, by inquiring at what points in the development of that tradition some elements in it came to be distorted through an exaggerated emphasis while others got lost, and by asking what latent resources remain in the tradition, such as might respond to the needs of the present situation.'[1]

If, to borrow Jean Daniélou's apt word for 'looking again', we 'reinterrogate' the Christian tradition, we will discover, among the 'latent resources', that the soil community which shares our present also shares our future. In Christian faith and hope, we are embedded thinking beings with responsibilities of gentle rule. As John Chrysostom observed in a sermon on Genesis, 'The word "image", indicates a similitude of command, the extent of our human power—that is to say, we resemble him in our gentleness and mildness, and in virtue, as Christ also says, "Be like your Father in heaven"'.[2] Chrysostom here uses the perceptive power of imagination, discovering the subordinate sacral sovereignty implicit in image and likeness (Gen. 1.26–28). To be a priestly sovereign is to be within, and not above, the community one serves. We do not ascend up and away but remain within the community in our common future. When we contemplate our tradition, discovering its latent resources, we do so in communion with fellow Christians, including our wise ancestors. 'We are,' said Bernard of Chartres in the twelfth century, 'as dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants. That is why we see further than they'. It is not good for men to contemplate alone! Even the first Christians, who gave us our gospel, learned from their great prophet ancestors. In a window at Chartres Cathedral the medieval glaziers portray the four evangelists standing on the shoulders of the great prophets. With our ancestors within the communion of saints we will discover hints and pointers about our earth's inclusion in salvation.

The Bible's hints about our interdependence with other soil beings are many and varied, and sometimes found in surprising places. We are vaguely familiar with the picturesque mountain goats, badgers, young lions and cranes of the psalmist. But, especially when we live in crowded settlements, we can fail to notice how biodiverse and varied is the community within which we worship our Creator.

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Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
Then shall all the trees of the wood sing for joy
before the Lord, for he comes,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth. (Ps. 96:11–13).

In a beautifully inclusive passage in the Book of Jonah animals share with people both in repentance for human sin, and in God's merciful forgiveness. In his words to a confused Jonah, God includes domestic animals in his pity on the Nineveh soil community: 'Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many cattle?' (Jonah 4.11).

In the new creation the whole soil community will be transformed radically, continuous with the living community we have known, but also, almost unimaginably discontinuous, a *new* heaven and *new* earth. There is a hint of this discontinuity in the differences between the familiar peaceable kingdom pictures in Isaiah and the different imagery in the New Testament. In the Isaian picture, as in similar pictures in the hellenized world, domestic animals and people live at peace with wild animals, people live well over a hundred years, and there is always abundance of food and drink. Despite these differences from 'the real world' as we know it, we can nevertheless feel almost at home in the Isaian scenes (Isa. 11.6–9; 65:21–25). Not so in the New Testament. The New Jerusalem represents a harmony of wild nature and human settlements such as has rarely, if ever, been experienced. People cohabit harmoniously with water, plants and animals, in a way only distantly similar to a sustainable farming and growing community supported by, and supporting, sustainable settlements (Rev. 21–22). To enjoy such harmony people and the whole soil community need redemption.

In Jesus God's Word entered our history and cosmos, becoming flesh, related to other flesh, as are we. In the words of Pope John Paul II, '"The first born of all creation" becoming incarnate in the individual humanity of Christ, unites himself in some way with the entire reality of man, which is also "flesh" . . . and in this reality with all "flesh", with the whole creation' *(Dom. et Viv.* 50.3*)*. Because he is related to all that is flesh, Jesus reconciles all earth creatures. Perception of the complete humanity of Jesus is sharper in some eras than in others, as we notice in the successive expressions of theological artists and craftsmen. According to the medieval historian R.W. Southern, the twelfth century enjoyed a new discovery of the humanity of Jesus. If we contemplate our living tradition

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imaginatively we can enjoy a similar discovery again. 'Quite suddenly the humanity of the Redeemer began to appear not simply as a stratagem to outwit the devil but as an expression of God's fellowship with mankind. In the light of this discovery, the terror faded, the sun shone, and prayers, poems, devotions of all kinds, mingling scholastic with monastic themes began to pour forth to express the humanity of God.'[3]

As human 'like unto us' Jesus was a learner as well as a teacher. As a boy Jesus learned about his—and our—soil community, from his family, rabbis, craftsmen, shepherds and, later, clients and travellers. John Meier observes, 'Nazareth was a village of close to 2,000 people, practically all of whom were Jews. The existence of a synagogue with some educational program for Jewish boys is a likely hypothesis. Especially if Jesus' family shared in a resurgence of religious and national sentiment among Galilean Jewish peasants, this hypothesis of some formal education in the local synagogue is well grounded.'[4] Above all he learned, at least in part, from his mother, at Nazareth, about the biodiverse, cultivated hills where he lived most of his relatively short life on earth. We know from the gospels that Jesus knew about compost and manure, pigs and pods, cropping, shepherds and sheep, mustard bushes and seeds, oxen and donkeys and birds, olive trees and vineyards. Most of these are still visible in, or near, Nazareth old town today.[5] When, according to Luke who was especially interested in Nazareth, Jesus, as a young man, read in the synagogue, he chose a text with connotations of Jubilee which includes rest for the soil and sharing the soil's gifts with strangers, even aliens, and with wild and domestic animals (Lk. 4.18–19; Isa. 61.1–2; 58.6–7). Centuries later Ignatius Loyola set aside a whole day or more in his *Spiritual Exercises,* for contemplation of Jesus in his early years. Jesus' Nazareth and brief public life were embedded in the Galilee soil. His resurrection is the beginning of the transformation of that special soil and of the whole soil community.

Nor should we ignore the importance of water upon which soil, or perhaps better, the rest of the soil community, depends, for food, growth and life. Water interpenetrates the soil community in every part, and flows through our own bodies. Salvation in Jesus includes *water.* After leaving Nazareth Jesus' first recorded prophetic act was his baptism in the Jordan in solidarity with the followers of the Baptist, and with the water and wild nature, upon which Jesus and his followers depended. 'He was born and baptised that by his passion he might consecrate the water' wrote Ignatius of Antioch (Eph. 18). An Orthodox liturgy celebrates, in community with water creatures, Jesus' epiphany in the Jordan. 'Today earth and sea share the joy of the world, and the world is filled with gladness. At Thy epiphany the whole creation sings Thy praises.' When the imprisoned

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Baptist sent followers to query Jesus's mission, water is again included when Jesus quoted an Isaian text closely followed by pictures of the flowering of the desert:

> For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
> and streams in the desert;
> the burning sand shall become a pool,
> and the thirsty ground springs of water. (Mt. 11.2–6; Isa. 35.5–7).

In his Jerusalem ministry Jesus, according to the evangelists, frequently visited Gethsemane and the Mount of Olives. Luke says that after teaching in the Temple Jesus returned to the Mount often at evening. 'Every day he was teaching in the Temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet.' (Lk. 21.37). And John writes, 'Jesus often went there with his disciples' (Jn. 18.2). An olive plantation is one of the most biodiverse of cultivated fields. Even today the Mount where Jesus prayed accommodates a wide variety of plants and birds, nourished, at least indirectly, by sheep and goat manure. I have been startled, when sitting there, at how alive the Mount remains, even with the discordant strife of cars below and around the hill.

Jesus knew this biodiversity well, it was similar to the olive plantations at Nazareth, which had nourished him, as our northern orchard fruit communities do ourselves, and became part of his body. His death, burial, and resurrection reconcile more than human 'mind, body and spirit'. As Walter Kasper says, 'The perfection of the individual and that of all humanity cannot be complete until the cosmos too is included in the completion.'[6] The cosmic quake recorded by Matthew, may connote earth inclusion, even compassion (Mt. 27.51, 54). Jesus' resurrection inaugurates the new creation, the initial transformation of our species and the cosmos in intimate relationships with God. In Jesus the soil community lives, in Jesus the soil community dies, in Jesus risen the soil community lives again and forever. To paraphrase 'Godspell', in Jesus the earth is dead, long live Jesus, long live the earth. The empty tomb reminds us that something *different,* continuity within discontinuity, happened that day at Calvary. 'Life is changed, not taken away.'

After our own death we are not disembodied persons. We remain conjoined to space, time and matter. Joseph Ratzinger notes that Jesus' resurrection is 'a pledge to space, time and matter. History and cosmos are not realities alongside spirit, running on into a meaningless nothingness. In the resurrection God proves himself to be also the God of the cosmos and history.'[7] The cosmos and history, including our own impacts on the earth, are different than the space, time and history we have experienced. We noted that the last pages of the New Testament go beyond the almost

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familiar—and readily imagined—future hope pictured by Isaiah. What the early Christian author(s) portray is beyond experience, a garden settlement where people cohabit harmoniously with wild and domesticated nature, where death and evil have vanished, where, in brief, God makes 'all things new', including history and the earth. What is made new is not a new thing, not a second creation *ex nihilo,* from nothing, but a transformative new creation of all things that are and have been.

Our acts of earth healing and conservation *now* are a parable of the future transformation when we will live in harmony with the whole creation. Every deed of healing of people and other creatures is a symbol of

> how it might be
> to live as siblings with heart and flower,
> not as oppressors. (Denise Levertov)

Perhaps people best symbolise or prefigure God's kingdom, when we 'till and keep' local soil communities in sustainable settlements with mixed organic food cultivation. Organic cultivation includes the whole community, from micro-organisms to frogs to sheep. Which is not to suggest that all people farm, garden, or grow food. Those immediately 'on the land' depend upon, support, and share services with people with other gifts. Even the most 'partially self sufficient' farmer or allotment gardener needs medical care and local markets and tradesmen. And they need him or her. What seems imperative is that all purchase, barter, use, and sustainably consume and recycle locally produced food, drink, and products. Where and whenever people in and near sustainable settlements nurture the local soil community extensively, sharing gifts and talents with one another, they are a living parable, or foretaste, of the new and everlasting Jerusalem.

1 John Macquarrie, *On Being a Theologian,* John H. Morgan, ed. (London, SCM, 1999), pp. 78–79.
2 In Robert Murray, 'The Image of God: Delegated and Responsible Authority', *Priests & People,* February 2000, p.53.
3 R.W. Southern, *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe,* 2 Vols. (Oxford, Blackwell, 1998), Vol. I, p. 29.
4 John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus,* 4 vols. (New York, Doubleday, 1991), Vol. I, p. 277.
5 Edward P. Echlin, *Earth Spirituality, Jesus at the Centre* (Alresford, Arthur James, 1991), pp. 54–61.
6 Walter Kasper, 'Hope in the final coming of Jesus Christ in Glory', *Communio: An International Catholic Review,* 12 (1985) p. 378.
7 Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life,* Michael Waldstein, trans., Aidan Nichols, ed. (Washington, Catholic University of America, 1988), p. 116.

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