

PENTECOST: PREACHING ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE

By Jude Siciliano, OP

On this Pentecost, and through the subsequent season of Pentecost, I am looking at the Sunday Lectionary readings with an eye for how I might include a deeper sensitivity to the environment in my preaching. I begin my awareness with the feast of Pentecost itself, and the readings of the day----- ACTS 2: 1-11 Galatians 5: 16-25 John 20: 19-23. But I hope these notes will help the preacher in interpreting and applying other scriptural passages to our current fragile ecological condition.

I became acutely aware that we were doing something terrible to the environment back in the seventies when I lived and preached in West Virginia. There I frequently saw strip mines where soil was being scrapped off the tops of hills, pushed into valleys and streams below to expose the underlying veins of coal. Then mechanized shovels with scoops the size of trucks scooped up the exposed coal, loaded it into trucks that took it off somewhere far away. The land that was left looked like the face of the moon; the streams below soon became poisoned as rain water washed down the exposed acid soil. Local residents would have to move out because their land had become too ugly, worthless for planting and dangerous to their health. Sometimes topsoil would be replaced, but it was a token job and did little to cover the scars or make the land fertile again. As a citizen I knew a terrible injustice was being done to the local residents. I also knew the land was being ruined, but I didn't make the connection from this environmental injustice to the faith I was preaching and its source in the scriptures. In recent years that has changed.

Our church leadership has been preaching and teaching about the effects on the poor of the world by pollution and overuse of natural resources. The poor bear an extra share of the burden because of our consumer demands for the earth's goods. We take the resources from their lands, disregard the unhealthy working conditions in which they manufacture our goods, and leave behind an unhealthy environment for them, one that is especially deadly for their children and the elderly.

This Jubilee year has been emphasizing a renewal of the earth, not only for the improvement of the living conditions of peoples around the world, but also for the sake of the earth itself. We are being reminded of something that our ancestors in faith knew, that the created world around us is a place of communion with God.

This holy encounter inspires us to respond with wonder and praise for our Creator. But our natural world is also injured. Jubilee calls us to listen to the voice of the poor of the world---- and to include in our listening the voice of nature.

So, with a sense of my responsibility as a preacher to include an environmental awareness in my preaching, I look at the scriptures for Pentecost and other liturgical celebrations and wonder: how it is possible to address the environment without manipulating the scriptural texts? I remember the great theologian and preacher Karl Barth saying that a preacher should have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. He was addressing the need to stay rooted in the Word, but to also see how daily life and the Word were to be in dialogue with one another. I guess, in the light of recent awareness about the environment, we preachers need a third hand in which to hold and read “the Book of Nature”, for nature is also a source of revelation we need to attend. Let’s see then how we might listen to our “sources” for preaching—the scriptures, the newspaper and creation around us.

The first reading is a stunning manifestation of the gift of the Spirit on the new community. John’s gospel account of that same gift is a much quieter event. Both speak truths about the Spirit and us. Whichever account we favor we want to remember that the gift of the Spirit was not a “once-back-then gift”. It’s not like one of those fancy kitchen gadgets, like a food processor, that when it new, we use over and over, but after the novelty wares off, we put on a shelf for some future, less frequent use. Acts shows us that the Spirit changed the community from a small group tucked away in an upper room to vibrant, highly visible, inclusive, and articulate believers who weren’t shy about proclaiming their faith. We are told in the Acts account that the noise from the sky is like a strong driving wind and that tongues “as of fire” are the symbols of this gifting-Spirit. Isn’t it appropriate that the manifestation of the Spirit should come through natural symbols? Pentecost was originally a harvest festival, called “the Feast of the First Fruits”, so the feast itself is earth-connected. This community had Jewish roots and the God of the Jews had often spoken and acted using natural signs and wonders: simple signs like flowing water, sheep, vineyards, trees etc.; spectacular signs like the parting of the sea, the water from the rock, the guiding cloud by day and fire by night.

Sin caused a terrible rupture in the human community and terribly damaged our harmony with one another and with creation. We turned against the Creator’s

plans for us. We, who were made in the “image of God”, the God who lovingly created our world with the care of a gardener, fell out of grace with this God. We forgot we were made to love God, our neighbor, ourselves and to tend the world around us. The gift of the Pentecost Spirit causes the community to go out and break down the barriers of race, economics, ethnicity and gender and form a new community of harmonious relations----as existed in the Garden before sin. We who are gifted with the Spirit are also made aware of the world community and know that Jesus’ teachings to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and heal the sick require us to be aware of how our overuse of the world’s resources leaves others hungry, naked and wounded. The Spirit has given us a big vision of the world and our relation to all living and inanimate creatures in it.

We need a holistic understanding of Christ’s salvation. The bible sees all of creation affected by the sin of the first humans. Where there was once harmony between humans and their surrounding world, now there is discord and disorder. In this biblical perspective, even nature experiences the fallen condition caused by human sin. Just as we struggle and long for our wholeness, so does creation long for a time when it “...will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.” (Romans 8: 19-22) The redemption of humanity occurs along with a renewal of creation. “I saw a new heaven and a new earth; the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.” (Rev. 21: 15)

The Incarnation also shows God’s intimate connection and love, not just for humankind but also for all of our natural world. Salvation has been achieved through Jesus’s death and resurrection, but the Gospel account points out that he has not left our worldly condition behind. His wounds are a reminder of his and our human condition. They point us to look at where he continues to be wounded among God’s creatures. The wounds of the world are linked to his. John’s Gospel has strong parallels to Genesis and so Jesus’ breathing on the disciples is reminiscent of the wind that swept over the primordial waters at the creation of the world; it also reminds us of God’s breathing the divine breath into the first human. The Genesis story shows humans as the pinnacle of creation, but also very much a part the creative natural surroundings. There was an original harmony, an original graced time in the humans’ relation to God and the created world. All this was fragmented by sin. Jesus’ breathing over his community is reestablishing the harmony that was meant to be there.

Jesus’ double greeting (shalom) speaks of a dawning of a long-awaited age. The new age promised by the prophets has begun, sin has been defeated and a new

human community is being created. As has been mentioned, the Johannine account of Pentecost lacks the fireworks of Acts. However, I would think though that most of us would identify more with the former. We have received the life-giving and life-sustaining creative breath. We look for ways to proclaim this new life by how we live out the gift of shalom among the humans and the rest of the created world around us.