

One Foot in Eden
Lent 1, Year B
1 March 2009

My friend Steve is a survivalist. His garage is full of gadgets to help you stay alive in the great outdoors - hammocks that can be comfortably hung from impossible mountain ledges, knives with an amazing variety of blades and tools. He is forever dreaming up new ways to make yourself comfortable in the wilderness. If a great natural disaster occurs I think I will make my way to his place, and place myself under his protection.

Wordsworth got us used to the idea that nature is a renewing force that makes us feel better by just being in regular contact with it. His argument was that long walks through the countryside – contemplation of the plant and animal kingdom would make you feel a calmer and better person.

But another great Victorian, Charles Darwin, pointed to a disturbing side of the natural world that people didn't want to think about. "Nature red in tooth and claw," is Blake's immortal description of the engine that drives the development of life on this planet. The drive to survive, the adaptation necessary to keep your species a going concern, and the capacity to hunt things down, kill them, and get them on the table. Animals and humans didn't get where they did today by being vegetarians.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the publication of Darwin's "Origin of the Species." The book caused major shock waves and controversy for believers who took the Genesis account of creation

literally. But by and large the sane Christian world now accepts Darwin's thesis that we didn't arrive straight from the hand of God. We are the outcome of a long process of evolution. We have only been the way we are for about a 100,000 years. Which helps me to understand why we are such a violent, avaricious lot, since the great world religions have only had a few thousand years to get to work on us.

Even if we are no longer bothered by our simian similarities, even if we accept with equanimity the chance outcome that has led to us being in the drivers seat rather than say Dolphins, the thoughtful and sensitive among us cant help but be disturbed by the violence, predation, strife and cruelty that routinely goes on in forests, and jungles, and deserts. Kill, kill, kill, seems to be the script written into the heart of creation.

"He was with the wild beasts, and the angels looked after him." The artist Stanley Spencer did some pictures of Jesus happily sojourning with scorpions and the like during his wilderness stay. Forty days and nights in the Judean desert wouldnt just be a matter of finding sufficient shade, sustenance and water. You would be vulnerable to any predator who decided to take an interest in you. But Jesus it seems managed to co-exist with them happily.

Earlier this year, at the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, I said that as Jesus came up out of the river Jordan he began to change the relationship of the material world to God. The first act of his ministry as he sank beneath the water was to begin the healing of the wellsprings of creation. As those drops of water

slid off him, already the material world was being drawn into the purposes of God.

Now in act two of his ministry he begins to reverse the curse laid on sentient life on this planet whereby animals and humans fear each other and feast off one another. The desert has become Eden. In this little pocket of the world for this brief period of time the creation is at peace with itself. In microcosm the world has gone back to the peace of the Sabbath on the seventh day of Creation - the shalom of God rests on this place of preparation for what will be a dynamic ministry of restoration of the world.

Step by step Jesus will roll back the forces that make life miserable in our world. For the past few weeks our readings in Mark have shown him engaged in act three of his ministry – the healing of human beings, the restoration of their bodies, minds and spirits back to their original image.

There is a message that goes with these acts of power. It is compressed into a slogan that announces his agenda. Every political party knows that you need a one liner that unforgettably lets people know what you stand for. “Peace, land and bread” – “You never had it so good” – “New Zealand the way you want it.” There has been endless debate about what “the kingdom of God is close at hand” means. That is what is so shrewd about his slogan. We are always discovering new layers of meaning in what it means to say that God rules in our world.

Today our attention is being drawn to the Eden restoring aspect of the Kingdom’s agenda. As we dwell on that image of the Garden of Eden we will be

imagining a world free of predation and suffering, where human beings can live without violence in close kinship with the animal world. It is a world where we are not the be all and end all, since we only arrived on the sixth day of Creation. This world pivots around God enjoying the world in all its multifarious forms on the seventh day.

It means that we will be content to let other life forms be themselves. In the wonderful words of Henry Beston, “We need another and wiser and perhaps more mystical concept of animals...They are not brethren, they are not underlings, they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth.”

It means having a bigger and more generous understanding of salvation. In the words of Metropolitan Gregorios, “Christ the incarnate one took flesh...He took matter into himself, so matter is not alien to him now. His body is a material body – transformed of course, but transformed matter. Thus he shares his being with the whole created order: animals and birds, snakes and worms, flowers and seeds. All parts of creation are now reconciled to Christ. And the created order is to be set free and to share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. Sun and moon, planets and stars, pulsars and black holes – as well as planet earth – are to participate in that final consummation of the redemption.”

The poet Edwin Muir had an idyllic childhood in the Orkney Islands. There was a close rapport between human beings and the animal world. Time did not press in with its relentless demands. The power of the landscape, and the remembered Scandanavian past of

the Orcadians, combined to make adults declare in a matter of fact way in his childhood hearing that they had seen mermaids at sea and had met fairies on moonlit beaches.

For all his adult life Edwin Muir was haunted by this lost world of innocence. "One foot in Eden still I stand," he begins one of his poems. The image of Eden powerfully shaped for good so much in his world. Here is part of his poem "the Confirmation," that he wrote when he met the woman to whom he would be so happily married.

Yes, yours my love, is the right human face.
I in my mind had waited for this long,
.....Your open heart,
Simple with giving, gives the primal deed,
The first good world, the blossom, the blowing seed,
The hearth, the steadfast land, the wandering sea,
Not beautiful or rare in every part,
But like yourself, as they were meant to be.