

W4: Nature and Humanity (How people and nature rely on one another)

Day a: *Cosmos*, Alexander Von Humboldt

Day b: Mark 4

Day c: *Water is Life*, A Rocha <http://www.arocha.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ARIN-54.pdf>

Day d: Isaiah 40

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Day f: Luke 4

Cosmos, Alexander Von Humboldt

Introduction

Cosmos was Alexander Von Humboldt's masterpiece, taking him so long to complete that the scientific community at the time had virtually given up on its publication. In it, Humboldt (1769-1859) presented a vision of the earth and everything in it as being interconnected. Humboldt conceived of nature and mankind relying on each other physically through 'webs of life' and 'chains of effect'. He was among the first to consider humanity's environmental damage, and how this could have an effect on future generations. But he also hinted towards humanity's emotional reliance on the nature and the feelings it excites in us. The study of nature was, for Humboldt, inseparable from the study of the mind in its material, social, and cultural context.

Quote and passage

"In considering the study of physical phenomena, not merely in its bearings on the material wants of life, but in its general influence on the intellectual advancement of mankind, we find its noblest and most important result to be a knowledge of the chain of connection, by which all natural forces are linked together, and made mutually dependent on each other and it is the perception of these relations that exalts our views and ennobles our enjoyments." (Cosmos, Vol 1, 1864)

Cosmos was unlike any previous book about nature. Humboldt took his readers on a journey from outer space to earth, and then from the surface of the planet to its inner core. He discussed comets, the Milky Way and the solar system as well as terrestrial magnetism, volcanoes and the snow line of mountains. He wrote about the migration of the human species, about plants and animals and the microscopic organisms that live in stagnant water or on the weathered surface of rocks. Where others insisted that nature was stripped of its magic as humankind penetrated into its deepest secrets, Humboldt believed exactly the opposite. How could this be, Humboldt asked, in a world in which the coloured rays of the aurora 'unite in a quivering sea flame', creating a sight so otherworldly 'the splendour of which no description can reach'? Knowledge, he said, could never 'kill the creative force of imagination' - instead it brought excitement, astonishment and wondrousness.

The most important part of *Cosmos* was the long introduction of almost 100 pages. Here Humboldt spelled out his vision - of a world that pulsates with life. Everything was part of this 'never-ending activity of the animated forces', Humboldt wrote. Nature was a 'living whole' where organisms were bound together in a net-like intricate fabric'.

The rest of the book was composed of three parts: the first on celestial phenomena; the second on the earth which included geomagnetism, oceans, earthquakes, meteorology and geography; the third on organic life which encompassed plants, animals and humans. *Cosmos* was an exploration of

the 'wide range of creation', bringing together a far greater range of subjects than any previous book. But it was more than just a collection of facts and knowledge, such as Diderot's famous Encyclopédie, for instance, because Humboldt was more interested in connections. Humboldt's discussion of climate was just one example that revealed how different his approach was. Where other scientists focused only on meteorological data such as temperature and weather, Humboldt was the first to understand climate as a system of complex correlations between the atmosphere, oceans and landmasses. In *Cosmos* he wrote of the 'perpetual interrelationship' between air, winds, ocean currents, elevation and the density of plant cover on land.

Questions for reflection

- *Humboldt inspired many more writers and scientists, like James Lovelock, to see all of creation as connected. How does this influence or change your views on humanity's position in creation?*
- *Why do you think nature inspires such strong emotions in us? Do you have any personal experience of this? Are there any natural sights you would particularly like to see in person?*

Some further reading

Andrea Wulf (2015), *The Invention of Nature (biography of Humboldt)*

Robert McFarlane (2009) *The Wild Places*

Amy Liptrot (2015) *The Outrun*

Mark 4

Introduction

Most of Mark's Gospel takes place around Galilee and has an intimate feel. In the opening of Mark 4 this sense of intimacy is enhanced through the crowd pressing in around Jesus and the story that Jesus tells which would be immediately recognizable to those listening.

More people globally live in cities than in rural areas and in developed nations like the United Kingdom the large majority live in urban environments. We have lost our intimacy with the land and so will not hear agricultural parables with the same sense of familiarity as the first hearers of Jesus' stories. In the following parable two kinds of knowledge are required to understand the parable the first is some very basic knowledge about agriculture which everyone in the audience would have. The second is understanding the Good News that Christ is proclaiming. On this second point there was little understanding amongst the listeners.

Mark 4: The Parable of the Sower

4 Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. 2 He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 3 "Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it

had no depth of soil. 6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." 9 And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

The Purpose of the Parables

10 When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11 And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; 12 in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'"

13 And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? 14 The sower sows the word. 15 These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. 16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. 17 But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. 18 And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. 20 And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

Questions for reflection

- *Is the use of nature in Christ's parables simply a device to connect with his first century audience or should we see something deeper in the repeated use of natural imagery in the parables?*
- *Might this parable tell us about the connection between a person's salvation and their physical or emotional wellbeing?*
- *Jesus' parables required a knowledge of his contemporary world. What kinds of knowledge do we require of our contemporary world to tackle the sorts of challenges we face?*

Further reading

Water is Life, A Rocha

Introduction

A Rocha is a Christian conservation organisation working towards the protection and restoration of the natural world. Its mission is presented as a response to a biblical imperative to protect the world God made and entrusted to human care. Its International News issues provide an alternative medium in which to read about ecological challenges and how these intersect with religion. The below extract is taken from an issue focused upon water, where water is used to elevate the connection between man and nature, and their mutual interdependence.

Extract

'Water is life' seems the best way to sum up what water means to humans and other creatures. Water makes up 70-90% of all living cells. We are born in water, we drink it, wash in it, use it for transport, irrigation, recreation, food gathering and hydro-electric power. Water has a central place in all of the world's major religions (in the Bible there are over 500 references to water – more than to worship or prayer!). Maori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa / New Zealand, introduce themselves by naming the river with which they identify. Freshwater ecosystems cover only 1% of the earth's surface but are home to 12% of all animal species. Over the last century, human demand for fresh water has grown at double the rate of population growth. It's predicted that two-thirds of the world's population will experience water stress by 2025. It's not surprising, then, that freshwater ecosystems are the most endangered on the planet. In the IUCN Red List, 34% of freshwater species are threatened – more than any other group. But attitudes to aquatic ecosystems are changing. Thirty years ago, town planners typically engineered urban streams as drains. These days, increasingly, urban streams are being restored as habitats and public assets. In New Zealand, land owners and 'stream care' groups are planting hundreds of kilometres of river banks with native plants. In the Bible, water is a powerful symbol for the life that God's spirit brings. Water is also portrayed as an agent – God cares for all creatures by providing them with water (eg Psalm 104:10-16). Thus, God's coming kingdom is a place of abundant clean water – the desert blooms (Isaiah 35) and a life-giving river flows through God's city (Revelation 22).

A Rocha teams are studying and protecting a fascinating variety of wetlands: a Portuguese estuary, a French floodplain, a Ugandan urban swamp, Ghana's only natural lake, seasonal pools in Lebanon and Canadian salmon rivers, to name just a few. In this issue you can read about some of these, as well as A Rocha's new marine research programme in Kenya. Efforts to restore and protect aquatic ecosystems might seem small compared to the scale of the threats, but they are signs of the renewal that God will one day complete. They are significant not just for the habitat that each one restores, but also for the ways they engage people in understanding and caring for these precious and increasingly threatened ecosystems.

The healing power of a Ugandan swamp

A Rocha Uganda is studying and protecting Lubigi Wetland, important for many water birds, birds of prey and large mammals. The wetland is essential not just for wildlife, but also for the people who live in the slums around it, and with whom A Rocha works. It provides them with fish, water to irrigate their vegetables and plants for medicine, crafts and food. In June and July 2012, with the help of science internship students from Makerere University, Kampala, A Rocha Uganda conducted a survey through household interviews in the communities surrounding Lubigi Wetland. Twenty-five plant species were found to be of medicinal value to the local people, who are financially unable to access western clinics. These are mostly used for the treatment of flu, coughs, pregnancy complications, non-clinical illnesses and the promotion of cultural beliefs. The medicines are prepared in a variety of ways such as making juice, extracting powder, smoke baths, concoctions, steam baths, cold infusions, poultices and rubbing into the skin. Four people were found to directly earn a living through treating people with herbs from the wetland. Five swamp plants are used to make crafts and dyes, and seven plants as food. Despite the local dependence on the plants, and the recent reduction in the size of the wetland, only the traditional herbalists were found to cultivate medicinal species at their homes.

Questions for reflection

- *Which Biblical references to water do you find most powerful?*

- *How far do you agree that recognition of nature and mankind's interdependence is critical to the latter's survival?*
- *Is there a danger in viewing nature through the lens of the ecosystem services it provides? Should we view nature as having intrinsic worth of its own?*
- *Are you familiar with A Rocha's work, or that of an organisation which is similar? What can be done to encourage Christian communities to take practical action to protect the earth?*
- *The Lubigi Wetland project encourages people to take care of the natural environment most local to them. Can you think of examples of local environments close to you which need protecting? What can you do to look after them?*

Some further reading

WWF's Climate Change Work available at: <http://www.wwf.org.uk/what-we-do/area-of-work/climate-change-and-energy>

A Rocha, Planet Wise Blog: available at <http://blog.arocha.org/en/>

Green Christians homepage <http://www.greenchristian.org.uk/>

Isaiah 40

Introduction

Isaiah is a single book but is generally considered to be composed of three distinct parts from different moments in the history of Israel. What unites these different parts is a concern with the contemporary and future state of Israel. During the period in which the different elements of Isaiah were written Israel was under threat from Assyrian expansion; had been taken captive in Babylon and was struggling with a return to Jerusalem. It is a book about threat, suffering, and restoration. It is also about human failure and the ultimate triumph of God.

Some commentators split Isaiah into three parts with Chapters 40 to 55 forming the middle of three parts. Today's reading is Isaiah 40 which in the tradition just described is written in exile. The passage is filled with the imagery of nature. In it human beings and the work of human hands are given similar status as the mountains and sheep. We, like sheep and grasshoppers, are a small part of the fullness of God's creation and above all creation stands the mighty God.

Isaiah 40

10 See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;

his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

12 Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand
and marked off the heavens with a span,
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure,

and weighed the mountains in scales
and the hills in a balance?

13 Who has directed the spirit of the Lord,
or as his counselor has instructed him?

14 Whom did he consult for his enlightenment,
and who taught him the path of justice?
Who taught him knowledge,
and showed him the way of understanding?

15 Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
and are accounted as dust on the scales;
see, he takes up the isles like fine dust.

16 Lebanon would not provide fuel enough,
nor are its animals enough for a burnt offering.

17 All the nations are as nothing before him;
they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.

18 To whom then will you liken God,
or what likeness compare with him?

19 An idol? —A workman casts it,
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold,
and casts for it silver chains.

20 As a gift one chooses mulberry wood[c]
—wood that will not rot—
then seeks out a skilled artisan
to set up an image that will not topple.

21 Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

22 It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;

23 who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

24 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

25 To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

26 Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.

27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the Lord,
and my right is disregarded by my God”?

28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
29 He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
30 Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
31 but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

Questions for reflection

- *God's power is declared to be far greater than any human or natural force. What are the implications of God's power for how we treat others and the natural world? Does it matter how we act if God's power is so much greater?*
- *We are like grasshoppers says the writer. If we are more like grasshoppers than like God how does this affect we should treat other creatures of creations?*
- *This section of Isaiah is written in exile and longs for the return of Israel to Jerusalem. Are there elements of your life where you long for a return of something from the past which is lost?*

Further reading

Iain Provan (2014) *Seriously Dangerous Religion*

Abraham Heschel (2001), *The Prophets*

John Goldingay (2014), *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah*

H is for Hawk, Helen Macdonald

Introduction

H is for Hawk is a raw account of Helen Macdonald's wrestling with bereavement following the sudden death of her father. Helen seeks solace through the training of a goshawk in what appears at first to be a retreat from the human world into the world of nature. Her restoration - mental, physical and spiritual - is brought about through her gradual realization that nature and humankind are separate, each with their own gifts. One gift that Helen finds in the natural world is the gift of healing as she finds the pain of loss becoming bearable. Interspersed throughout Helen's writing are allusions to T H White's 'Goshawk' by T H White, a training manual for falconers.

Extract

I've moved back to the city, to a little rented house in a street near the river with a small sunny garden that ends in a tangle of briars. Cats stalk the pavement outside, there are pigeons all over the

roof, and it is good to be back in a house I can call my own for a while. Today I am unpacking boxes and stacking books on shelves. Three boxes down, five to go. I open the next box. Inside, on top of the other books, is *The Goshawk*.

Oh, I think as I pick it up. It is strange to see it again, because I've not thought about White for a while. As I grew happier his presence receded, his world more and more distant from mine. I look at the scuffed spine, open it, and flip to the very end. I want to read the very last page, where White lists all the things Gos was: a Prussian officer, Attila, an Egyptian hieroglyph, a winged Assyrian bull, 'one of the lunatic dukes or cardinals in the Elizabethan plays of Webster'. A litany of human things in stone and armour, in marks on pages and dints in sun-baked clay. I peer out of the dusty window to Mabel in the garden. She has bathed and preened and now she's leaning backwards to the oil-gland above her tail, nibbling it gently, then pulling each tail feather through her beak to make it waterproof. I know she is content: the half closed, happy eye, the rattling of her feathers: these are signs of raw good humour. I cannot know what she is thinking, but she is very alive.

I think of White's list of things and what a strange, sad ending it was. I swear to myself, standing there with the book open in my hand, that I will not ever reduce my hawk to a hieroglyph, an historical figure or a misremembered villain. Of course I won't. I can't. Because she is not human. Of all the lessons I have learned in my months with Mabel this is the greatest of all: that there is a world of things out there – rocks and trees and stones and grass and all the things that crawl and run and fly. They are all things in themselves, but we make them sensible to us by giving them meanings that shore up our own views of the world. In my time with Mabel I've learned you feel more human once you have known, even in your imagination, what it is like to be not. And I have learned, too, the danger that comes with mistaking the wildness we give a thing for the wildness that animates it. Goshawks are things of death and blood and gore, but they are not excuses for atrocities. Their inhumanity is to be treasured because what they do has nothing to do with us at all.

I put White's book on the shelves, make myself a cup of tea. I am in a contemplative mood. I'd brought the hawk into my world and then I pretended I lived in hers. Now it feels different: we share our lives happily in all their separation. I look down at my hands. There are scars on them now. Thin white lines. One is from her talons when she had been fractious with hunger; it feels like a warning made flesh. Another is a blackthorn rip from the time I'd pushed through a hedge to find the hawk I thought I had lost. And there were other scars, too, but they were not visible. They were the ones she'd helped mend, not make.

Questions for reflection

- *When has an experience of the natural world had a healing effect on you or someone you know?*
- *Are humans creatures within creation or beings set above the rest of creation?*
- *Why do you think we try to give natural beings "meanings that shore up our own views of the world"? What examples can you think of?*
- *How much do you think we learn from living closely together with animals, whether as pets or as working or farm animals?*

Some further reading

J.R.R Tolkien (1955) *The Lord of the Rings*

James Vance Marshall (1959) *Walkabout*

Peter Høeg (1992) *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*

Luke – Jesus in the wilderness

Introduction

The wilderness features in both the Old and New Testaments. It is a place of wandering for the people of Israel on their Exodus from Egypt; it is the place from which the voice of John the Baptist emerges and it is in the Wilderness that Jesus is tempted by Satan. The author of Luke in writing chapter four connects Christ's time of preparation and testing with the period of preparation that Israel experienced in the wilderness. These connections are made through the parallels seen in the number of forty days and forty years spent in the wilderness as well as the temptations which echo God's gift of mana to Israel in the desert and God's offer to Moses to make a great nation from him.

In early Christianity monastic communities spring up in the wilderness as attempts to avoid the corruption of both the Church and State.

Luke 4

Luke 4

The Temptation of Jesus

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. 3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." 4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." 8 Jesus answered him, "It is written,

'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

9 Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10 for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you, 11 and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

12 Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 13 When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

Questions for reflection

- *Why do you think is significant about the location of the wilderness as the site of the temptation of Christ?*
- *What does wilderness mean to you?*
- *Do you think humanity needs places of wilderness?*

Further reading

Roberta Bondi (1998), *To Love as God Loves*

Rowan Williams (2004), *Silence and Honey Cakes*

Roger Deakin (2007), *Wildwood*