

THE PLACE OF NATURE

I vividly remember one Saturday morning when I was a boy. My friend Tommy Wilson and I had risen early and, in the silken dawn, we had walked the woods and splashed the water of Beaver's Pond. We were returning home and were walking down the unpaved hill of Marcia Boulevard. The boulevard was lined on both sides with trees, behind which were ranch houses, and behind them woods. The trees were filled with new leaves and the air ran like liquid across our faces and down our arms. Birds sang. Lilacs scented the air. The sky was a deep blue and a few puffy clouds scampered like lambs in the blue meadow overhead. The sun was now fully up and the day was filled with promise. Indeed, the spring was full of promise. And beyond the horizon of both one could just begin to sense the promise of summer vacation. It hung there just at the edge of consciousness, its presence green and warm. There was all about us glory, all about us the promise of glory, deep within us the sense that we had been made for this glory. We breathed it deeply into our lungs. We walked upon its swell.

I have always remembered that morning, and in the remembering understood the misplaced (and forbidden!) worship of those gods embodying the glory of nature. For the glory is real. God did not make creation to be simply a mirror of His glory. No, the glory of God is that He is the fountain of glory, real glory. The glory of God is that the glory of creation reveals the goodness not just of the Creator, but of the creation itself. It is this glory, which really and truly demands our attention and time, which really and truly is admirable, which really and truly elicits joy and wonder and praise of a sort: it is this glory that calls us to the unfettered praise of God, who from nothing has made all things by His word, who by His steadfast love has made us, and made us capable of knowing and rejoicing in His good creation, who has, in addition to all this, made us to know Him, and thus to know the proper and true place of nature.

Having said this, I must now admit that, even though we have been made to know the proper and true place of nature, the reading of Holy Scripture has, on first and second (and even third and fourth) reading proved to be something of a shock, almost like a sudden wave of cold water waking me from a warm and fragrant dream. This does not mean that scripture has suggested to me that nature is a bit of fluffy unreality. Nor has it suggested that the glory I have sensed is not really there. What has happened is this: in the Bible I have found myself called to a glory that will brook no competition. I have found myself called to the God who made all things and will not in the smallest way recognize or allow the recognition of a rival god. Thus I find that, in the biblical description of man's relationship to God, nature is simply ignored, especially if we consider the shape and content of corporate worship. This is true even though man finds his home in nature at times (e.g. Eden) and is as reliant on her for sustenance as a child is reliant on his mother's breast.

This ignoring of nature is especially obvious if we trace the biblical notions of temple—i.e. those places where God is present and to be worshipped.

For instance, in the Old Testament there is the Temple. This is the place where one is to come to worship God. This Temple, placed in Jerusalem, is the place to worship. Not high places on hills. Not the ground beneath ancient oaks. Indeed, we find that the grand places provided by nature, those places that so attracted the nations that lived about Israel and worshipped the gods, were forbidden as places of worship to the Israelites.

Modern sensibilities (yes, my sensibilities!) are shocked by this. Indeed, one would think just the opposite would be the case: underneath the stars, high upon a hill would seem to be the perfect place for worship. Surely God would be most keenly felt and most easily worshipped in such a place. But such is not the case. It was to a building built by the hands of men, according to the plan of God, that God's people were summoned. Of course, there were things of nature represented in the Temple: palm trees and open flowers, for instance. But these items were artificial, carved in nave doorposts of olive wood.

But it is not just the fact of the Temple, but what determined the substance of worship in the Temple of Jerusalem, that shocks our sensibilities. For the nations living alongside Israel, worship was almost a matter of being in tune with nature. There were gods who ruled the fields, gods who ruled the sea, gods of the mountain, etc. Worship meant appeasing them. Worship meant moving them to grow crops, give rain, render women fertile. For these gods of nature there were practices of worship that seemed to flow with the rhythms of nature. There were fertility rites, temple prostitution, human sacrifice, etc. For the Israelites, on the other hand, what mattered was the word, spoken and written. What mattered were the stories of the mighty Acts of God. What mattered were God's pronouncements through the prophets. What mattered was the instruction given by God for worship, for the sacrifice of animals, for the forgiveness of sins. What mattered was the law of God. For the Israelites, then, what mattered was not simply physical well being (although this was, of course, an important, if somewhat secondary, concern). What mattered was being the people of the one, true God. What mattered was learning to obey Him. This, of course, did not separate the Israelites from their environment, from nature. But it certainly shaped the relationship between God's people and the natural environment.

This does not mean that the worship of Jahweh was simply an intellectual artifice. We are not talking about human invention. We are talking about God's self revelation. We are not talking about a second rate cosmos replacing the real cosmos, i.e. nature. We are talking about the Creator of all that is, lifting man above nature, we are talking about the beginning of man's restoration to his status as the one who was created in the image of God, to his status as a child of God.

Thus we see that the knowledge of Jahweh and the subsequent worship of Him did not involve nature. There is an interesting passage in the first chapter of Genesis that illustrates this. When the author of that chapter writes about the creation of the sun and the moon he does not name them. Instead they are referred to as “the greater light and the lesser light”. This was because the nations about Israel worshiped them. And so, to indicate their subordination to their Creator, they were not named.

(There is another interesting passage that indicates that the worship of Jahweh did not rest on man made artifice. It is found in the twentieth chapter of Exodus. Before the temple was built by Solomon, the Israelites would build altars in places where God had visited someone like Abraham in a vision. In this chapter the Israelites were forbidden to shape the stones of the altar with a metal tool. This was, I believe, because the matter at hand, i.e. the worship of Jahweh, was not founded on the skill of man’s art. Instead, the matter at hand involved the work and presence of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses, the One who was revealing Himself as God, the One, True God.)

In the New Testament the focus of the place of worship shifts. The place is no longer a building. It is a people. And so we find early Christians worshiping wherever they can gather: in houses, occasionally in the temple at Jerusalem (it was destroyed in 70 A D), by rivers, in catacombs, etc. The point here is that God has made a new temple out of human beings. He is present wherever two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus.

Now, we must not mistake this new notion of “temple” in a New Age way. The people have not become God. Nevertheless, belonging to Jesus makes them part of God’s temple. And it is here, in this new temple, in the gathering together of God’s people, that God is present in a special way and real worship takes place.

Furthermore, in the New Testament, even though we are dealing with a new temple, the shape of the substance of worship, as was the case in the Old Testament, is not determined by nature. It is determined by God’s self revelation in Jesus Christ. And this revelation is passed on in the words and writings of the Apostles.

When we read of those early Christian worship services we see that there was plenty of passion and, at times, even ecstasy, involved. But there was a way of ordering all that happened. And that way did not involve the rhythms of the natural world, nor its glory. It involved Jesus Christ, who He is, what He said, the strong hope He has given us, etc.

When we come to the end of Holy Scripture, to the book of Revelation, there is another shift. At the end of time God Himself will come to dwell with man. There is no temple. For He is present. Fully present. And His people will see Him, as it were, face to face. Not only is there no need of a temple in the New Jerusalem, but there is no need of the sun, for God is present. And He will be our light.

So we see that the goal of all worship is not for the people of God to be one with the world about them. It is for the people of God to have eternal life in the very presence of God, and in this sense to be one with Him. Now we begin to understand why the texture of biblical worship involves stones and people, liturgy, reading and hearing, the claim, command and revelation of God, why, indeed, nature is almost utterly ignored. Man, who, by the fact of creation, is part of nature is being lifted out of nature into a special relationship with the Creator.

Let me give a concrete example of what this “lifting” might mean. Studies of different primates have been done, including studies of human beings, that indicate that there is a kind natural rhythm to the relationship of male and female. One of the studies I read indicated that monogamy might be considered “normal”, but not for a lifetime. What was normal, according to this study, was a series of monogamous relationships. I do not know how well these studies were done, but for the sake of argument let us admit that they were well done and that they have accurately described the animal aspect of man. The Word of God ignores this natural state. It calls us to a different kind of relationship, one lived in obedience to the command of God, one which is driven and shaped by the keeping of promises. Thus, our natural proclivities are tempered and denied the ruling reigns of our lives. We love, finally, “till death do us part”, not just because we are driven to, but because we are commanded to and, in obedient response, chose to. It is finally the command of God, the claim of God, the work of God in Jesus Christ that makes us human. We are lifted above nature, and in that lifting we become what we were meant to be: children of the living God, those who have been created and redeemed to bear the image of God. Thus nature does not rule us.

What, then, is the place of nature? To say that there is no place for nature in our life of worship is not to say that there is simply no place for her in the life of man. There is, indeed, a place for her. In fact, the picture scripture gives us is one of a rich and varied relationship.

Nature is a kind of gift to man. When we read the first chapter of Genesis we see that Creation is being shaped in such a way as to make a place for man. Not only that, but this place is one that provides man with all he needs to sustain his physical life. Rightly understood, then, the metaphor “Mother Nature” becomes an almost irreducible metaphor. Furthermore, nature is created, as is man, by the word of God. She is, in this sense, kin, a fellow creature. In this sense we understand why St. Francis referred to “Brother Sun” and “Sister Moon”. We are, in some sense, dealing with family.

Furthermore, man has been given a kind of headship over nature. He is a kind of Lord, or sub-Lord, if you will, receiving his appointment from the Creator of all. Again, this is made clear in the first two chapters of Genesis.

Finally, it would seem that man and nature are bound at the hip even after the second coming of Christ. Nature does not disappear at the end of time. Instead, in the twenty first chapter of Revelation we read of a “new heaven and a new earth”. Nor is this the first time we have been confronted in the Bible by such a notion. In the eighth chapter of

Romans we are told that all creation groans for this event. Furthermore, we are told that the reason for this groaning has to do with man's intimate relationship with nature. For when man was broken by choosing sin over God, it would seem that all of Creation was broken. Thus the curse that fell on Adam and Eve after the fall involved the natural world. When the head fell the body fell.

And, thus, all of Creation awaits the "revealing of the Sons of God". For when we appear in our resurrection bodies, healed from the dark brokenness of sin, nature also will be healed from her brokenness. Death and decay will be no more for her as well.

So we begin to understand the remarkable relationship between man and nature. She is our mother and sister and brother. She is God's gift to us. And man has been made her lord. We both await, with great longing, the coming our common Maker and Redeemer, the Lord God Almighty.

But there is something more to be said. Matters become complicated when we consider the glory of nature. And whether we consider the wonder of a whale or the physical reality of a human being the glory is real. It invites, as we have said, worship. And if not worship, it then invites the development of the false notions of pantheism or pan-en-theism. Both invitations, of course, are to be rejected.

Nevertheless, the glory stands. It is real. God made it. And if He does not invite us to use nature as a kind of medium for His presence, He, nevertheless, makes a place for nature once our relationship with Him has been established. Let me put the matter another way: if nature cannot contain the temple, that is, become the temple and reveal God and succor true worship, nevertheless, there is, in the temple, that is, in our life with God, a place for nature. The psalmist indicates this when he writes: "Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at thy altar, O Lord of hosts." (84:3).

Why is there a place for the sparrow in the temple of God? Because she is glorious, because she, even in her smallness and humility, represents nature, which is glorious, because it was over her and all the natural creation that God spoke these words: "it is good".

And as there is a place for the sparrow in the Temple, so, in our lives with God there is a place for nature. In her proper place nature no longer confuses or tempts. Instead, by the very fact of her goodness and glory, she praises God. And she, by the fact of her goodness and glory, all of which is given to us as gift, calls us to praise and thanksgiving to the Lord our God. Great is her glory. Greater still the glory of her Creator.

Thus we understand that if it is a mistake to see the Divine in nature, it is also a great mistake not to understand nature as the creation of God, the creation of which He spoke over and over "it is good." Nature is God's gift to us. As such she is good, she is to be cared for, treasured, esteemed. That she does not have a part in corporate worship does not mean that she is nothing. In our greed we moderns have treated her as if she were nothing, as if by the work of our own hands we could create something better, as if, in our effort to create this something, should we happen to destroy great chunks of nature,

we would have done nothing wrong. This is great nonsense. It may very well be that we need always to take care that we do not confuse the glory of nature with the glory of God. But the shape and content of the sin of modern man is so twisted and pale that we must also take care to esteem this great gift God has given us, to give her glory due recognition, to treasure her as the great gift she is, to care for her.

In the twenty second chapter of Revelation, the city New Jerusalem is described as having a river flow from her center, that is, from the throne of God, out into the city. It is this same river we read of in the forty seventh chapter of Ezekiel. This river flows from the throne of God into the countryside. This river is the river of life. Life comes from this river which comes from the center of the city. It is from this river, which flows from the throne of God, this throne which is in the center of the city of God, that life comes.

This is certainly a strange picture. The cities we build are just the opposite. From the countryside we bring into our cities the things that give life, the things that are alive. It is from the countryside that food comes. It is from rivers and lakes outside the city and wells beneath the city that water comes. Our cities are great areas of lifeless artifice. Only what we plant is alive. We sense this whenever we step out of our houses for fresh air, whenever we find we must drive out of our cities for the fresh air we seek. We have a sense of the artificiality of our environment, and most of us find that we must seek green spaces so that we can touch and be touched by something real, something alive.

To sense this contradiction between the City of God and the City of Man is right and proper. The work of our hands is not the work of God's hands. He is the author and giver of life. Our work is a poor imitation of His, and when we forget that, when we worship the work of our own hands, we stand in peril of holding in contempt the work of God's hands. And in the wake of that contempt comes the destruction of the gift of God. We have seen this contempt, this destruction far too often. It is perhaps hinted at in the eighteenth verse of the eleventh chapter of Revelation where we are told that there will come a time when God will destroy "the destroyers of the earth."

In the twenty second chapter of the book of Revelation we find another interesting picture. There were read of trees growing on each side of the river of life. These trees are the trees of life. They bear fruit for the healing of nations.

It strikes me that in this strange and wonderful picture we see the place of nature. She is represented by the trees of life. It is from the throne of God that the river of life comes. And from her waters the trees of life take life and sustenance. It is to the throne of God we long to go, it is there that we give praise. But on the way there are the trees of life. And we treasure these trees and sup on their fruit. We delight in these trees, and, if needs be, care for them. And because of their glory and goodness, on our way to the throne of God, we are led to praise Him, by whom all things are made, to praise Him who has revealed Himself to us in His Son, and who, through His Son, by the work of the Holy Spirit, has made for us the trees of life.

Let me close with a homely analogy. I do so because what I have described is not unique. It is applicable to many relationships. For instance, when I attend Church with my wife, the focus of my attention is not my wife. Nor am I the focus of her attention. She is not the object of my worship. Nor am I the object of her worship. We have set aside this time to come into the presence of God, to know Him, to worship Him. I do not expect my wife to function as God in my life. Nor does she expect me to function in this way. God has rightly claimed the center of both our lives. Having said this I hasten to add that I love my wife more than anything else in this world. And I see her as the greatest gift God has given me, outside of the gift of Himself.

Now, I think that what I have described is not unique to me, but quite simply how any man must understand the place of his wife, how any woman must understand the place of her husband. In our life with God there is made a place for our spouse, and not vice versa.

One might put the matter this way: in my love for God there is made a place for my love for my wife, and not vice versa. But finally, there is also this to be said: when I love God first, the love He teaches me for my wife, the love He commands for my wife, the love He enables for my wife is far greater than any love which might spring from a life that does not have God at the center.

So, too, in our relationship with nature. When we know God and honor Him rightly, then we come to a right understanding of nature. Then we see her glory rightly. Then, in gratitude to God, we are enabled to esteem nature rightly, and, to our delight, we find this esteem to be higher and more steadfast than we had ever dare imagine.

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