

Understanding Scripture through Agriculture

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ignorance of Christ; but
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ignorance of Scripture



By Tim Streiff

Part I - Gospels

In his commentary on the book of Isaiah, St. Jerome famously said, “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” Sacred Scripture reveals Christ as the fullness of God’s revelation, God revealing himself to us through the Incarnation. The more we read and understand God’s Word in Scripture, the more we will come to know Christ. However, ignorance of agriculture is ignorance of Scripture. In order to understand sacred Scripture, we must be willing to learn about creation, agriculture, and rural life. When we look at the parables in the Gospels, the places where Christ preached and performed miracles, and especially the places where Christ went to pray, many happened in an agrarian or rural settings. Much of Christ’s min-

istry took place in the context of rural communities. Capernaum, Emmaus, and Bethlehem were all rural towns in Israel. Christ himself worked as a carpenter in the small town of Nazareth, which was likely much the same size as the rural communities that we call home. He was known in his hometown by his work and through his family, and he had relationships with others which likely seemed commonplace before he began his ministry.

Even as far back as Christ’s birth, the good news was first proclaimed to those working in the fields. It was the shepherds watching over their flocks who were able to observe the signs in nature that heralded the coming of the Messiah. Later, the three wise men came from afar after

seeing the star in the east which communicated the birth of the King of Kings. Christ called fishermen to be his first disciples and to bring the good news to others; these were men who understood a hard day’s work. Their daily efforts prepared them for the dedication which the Christian life requires. They were accustomed to rising early and going out to the areas they knew well to bring in a catch for their families and for their community. Others whom Christ called during his life on earth to be great saints were also prepared by their rural circumstances for Christ’s call. St. Simon of Cyrene was a farmer who was accustomed to bringing in the harvest, and that work prepared him to pick up Christ’s cross and follow him, first to Calvary, then

as a disciple after the Resurrection.

When Jesus spoke to his disciples, he used examples from agriculture. It was no accident that Christ spoke in parables which included livestock and crops, landowners and tenants, employers and employees. The stories that Christ told to convey the meaning of the kingdom of God are stories which would be most understandable to farmers, shepherds, and fishermen. Christ traveled between towns spreading the Gospel. He met his followers in the open places and would go alone into nature to pray. Christ preached in the mountains, fields, and at the shore about the kingdom of God. He went to the desert to prepare for his passion for 40 days and went to a garden to pray after the Last Supper.

These are just a few of the examples of how knowledge of agriculture and living close to the land informs our understanding of Scripture. If we want to understand Scripture more fully, we must take time to learn about the context in which Christ has communicated himself to us in sacred Scripture.

Part II - Genesis

Scripture also informs our view of creation.

Why does God use creation and agriculture in Scripture to communicate the truths about the supernatural order? Is it merely because his audience was primarily rural and agricultural, and if he had ministered first to urban dwellers, he would have used examples of the marketplace? No, Christ deliberately chose to go first to a rural town and communicate the good news to those who were living close to the land.

God reveals himself in the natural order as Creator even before he inspired the Old Testament. Before God inspired the writers of the books in sacred Scripture, he wrote the book of creation.

He revealed himself to our first parents in the garden as the provident creator who placed them there to be cooperators with him. Since sin had not entered the world, there was no toil in working with the land, nor was there antipathy between man and the animals. There was only joy and wonder. Even the animals that were of no direct use to man were given to man for his knowledge of their natures, so that man could, in turn, know and glorify God. We learned about God from his works of creation. Sacred Scripture completes that knowledge since God reveals himself explicitly in salvation history and fully in the Incarnation. What does that mean for how we read the book of creation? We must approach creation as a preamble to Scripture since grace builds upon nature and does not destroy it.

Scripture testifies to the first book revealing the Creator's hand: In the beginning of Genesis, God creates and then calls his creation "good." There is a structure to how God creates: first the light, then the waters, then the dry land, then the plants, the animals, and finally, man. Each time, God calls each act of creation "good." Creation being called "good" tells us two things. First, it tells us that there is a relationship between created things. There is a structure to creation, an ordering, where each creature builds upon the other, interconnected and integrated. Second, it also tells us something about the relationship of creation to God. What does Christ say at the start of his con-

versation with the rich young man in Matthew 19? "Why do you ask me about the good? There is only one who is good" (Matt 19:17). Christ knew the Scriptures he was explaining that we don't call God "good" because he reflects nature, we call creatures "good" because they reflect and participate in the goodness of God. God is the one who is good; if creation is good, if its ordering is good, if the role of man as steward in the garden is good, it is because all of it reflects God. Creation shares in God's goodness; however, we come to know God's goodness because we experience it first in the language of the plants and animals, from the providential arrangement of the stars in the sky to the kernels on an ear of corn.

Living in a rural place, you have a front row seat to the drama of the universe. God's writing is so impressive that he can conduct an alphabet of living beings to tell this story in ways we don't recognize immediately up close. Some of the players are thousands of years old, like the Great Lakes; others have a lifespan that passes too quickly for us to grasp, like fruit flies. We should be able to recognize it more fully in rural places and in agriculture, since in the countryside there is far less concrete to get in the way.

By studying creation and cooperating with God in agriculture, we can learn about the integral ecology at the heart of creation, our place in it, and how Scripture builds upon God's revelation in nature. This forms the basis for how Christ is revealed to us, and how, by him taking on all of our embodied nature, we have the possibility of salvation.