

FACING OUR FRAGILITY

Meditations on the Presence of God in Creation

By Christopher Thompson, PhD

It was March of 2011 when the horrific videos started appearing on the web. A wall of water was scraping entire cities from Japan's landscape in scenes reserved for apocalyptic fantasy films. Some ten thousand people died from that now infamous Tsunami of 2011, and to this day we feel the abiding tragic loss of so many men, women and children. Scenarios such as these cut us to the core and lay bare the devastating fact of our fragility. Suspending just for a moment the scope of the human dimension of such tragic loss, I remember thinking to myself after failing to comprehend the sheer scope of the tragedy: "There goes Earth Day."

"Earth Day," which was scheduled to fall one month after this global tragedy, then seemed like such a naïve trivialization of the reality of life on this planet, a willful obliviousness to the sheer scope of indifference nature seems to cast, an affectation only the elite class could conjure. When the ocean itself seems set on destroying all that we love and care about, who in their right mind would stop and say: isn't it time we pause and consider the blessings of the earth?

And then, by an orchestration of events that only Divine Providence could arrange, it happened that in 2011, Earth Day and Good

Friday fell on the same day, April 22, 2011. I now see the stark juxtaposition as a divine tutorial writ large—a profound instruction about the splendor of creation, our fragility and the astonishing fact of Jesus Christ.

For it is in Christ alone that the mystery of the earth's beauty and the fragility of our own existence finds its resolution. Now is not the time to rehearse all of the theological problems of evil and its consequences for our faith. But now may be the time, especially in light of the Coronavirus and its devastating effects, to remember if only briefly some of the basic truths of Christ and His earth.

It is in Christ alone, not the earth nor our efforts to manage it, that we place our only hope for an everlasting life. And, the deepest wound of our existence—being surrounded by such beauty while being haunted by our death—finds its remedy. Down through the centuries of repeated natural calamities, the Church, in her humility and with the deepest empathy for truly tragic human suffering, makes the most radical proclamation of the gospel to a fragile people, a proclamation that at times pushes us to the edge of audacity: the Church proclaims Jesus Christ as the one through whom all things were made and the one through whom our death finds its resolution.

In Christ, the terrifying dread of our fragility is not removed (even our Lord sweat blood at the prospect of His death), but it is taken up into the heart of the Father through the suffering, death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. In Christ, the deepest and most painful mystery of life—our own death—finds its resolution in faith. Nothing is promised here that alleviates the pain, the loss, and dread at the contemplation of our passing. Faith does not protect us from the utter dread. But, faith in Christ does provide hope, a hope in something—indeed, someone—greater than death itself. And, in this hope we find salvation (Rm 8:24).

It is only in the shadow of the cross of Good Friday, then, that we can even consider any thought of Earth Day. For it is in Christ that the deepest contradiction of our earthly life finds its resolution. Only in Christ can we be thankful for the splendor of the earth, a splendor which escapes our comprehension and evokes such probative questions about our own passing.

These days, it is not a tsunami and it is not limited to Japan. A plague has the world in its grips and pushes to the front of everyone's imagination the specter of death in ways not experienced by many of us. But at the risk of going beyond the edge of audacity,

let us in faith once again propose the fact of Jesus Christ. And, without in any way diminishing the real anxiety and fear this virus evokes in all of us, let us come to our knees, if not our senses, and declare that it is in Christ, and Christ alone, that we find our only hope. And it is Christ, and Christ alone, that the beauty of God's creation and the abhorrence of death find their reconciliation.

For Christ is the one through whom all things were made *and* the one who conquers human death. Without Christ, the beauty of creation and the horror of death point to an utterly tragic rupture in our existence. For what could be more cruel than to be drawn forward in praise for the beauty of the earth only to be crushed by the weight of one's inevitable annihilation? But, with Christ we celebrate the earth and its splendor and face the sure fact of our death with a *surer* hope of everlasting life. Only with confidence in God, the Father of Jesus Christ and the Creator of heaven and earth, can we turn to Him in faithfulness, and without naivete, acknowledge an "Earth Day".

As a suggestion for your own personal prayer and meditation during these especially troubling times, I have adapted a prayer exercise first developed in my book, *The Joyful Mystery: Field Notes Toward a Green Thomism*. Originally intended to inspire a meditation on the presence of God in creation, I offer it as a suggestion for private devotion. The suggestion here is merely a private strategy, nothing more, for encouraging in you a deeper love for Christ, His Earth, and the promise of eternal life in these challenging times.



THE MYSTERY OF CREATION AND THE INCARNATION

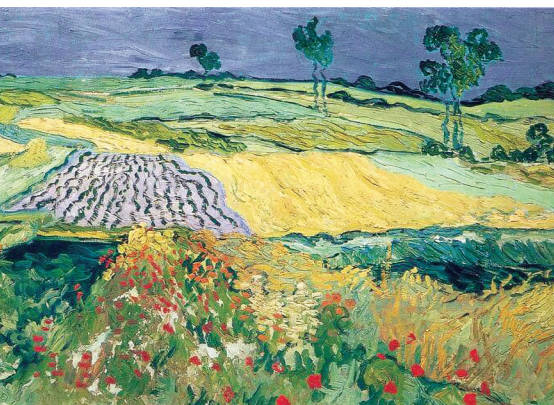
"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (Jn. 1:14)

This famous line from the opening of the Gospel of John marks an excellent point of departure for a reflection about life on earth. The earth is not foreign to God, not in the least. Instead, *dwelling among us*, God chose to enact His plan of love and redemption on this land. Second, at a deeper level, all of creation bears the impress of the Word, the Logos, the one through whom all things are made. Awe before the beauty of creation is a kind of invitation to adoration of the Son. One can reflect on those occasions of awe and thank God for His presence in our lives.

THE MYSTERY AND POWER OF BEAUTY

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." (Mt 6:28)

One of the few activities that is available to us in these days of restricted life is the ability to go outside and contemplate nature. This may be an opportunity to direct our minds to something beautiful. Perhaps have a flower on hand as a spiritual aid, ponder its incredible intricacy, its delicate nature, its beauty, its fragility—and yet, its power—to produce something beautiful for God. Jesus uses this occasion of a flower to remind us not to worry. God is in charge and we can take comfort in Him. In knowing something beautiful, we know God is with us. We can recall a wondrous location and consider how God seeks to meet and care for us there.



THE MYSTERIOUS POWER OF CHRIST

“Who is this that even winds and sea obey Him?” (Mt. 8:27)

We need to be honest: nature is not always an occasion of delight. Especially in these times, pondering the beauty of a flower is one thing—bracing for a pandemic on the horizon another. Especially with the introduction of sin, we can count on misunderstanding nature and resent its ways. But Christ takes the occasion of ill weather to remind the disciples (and us) of the importance of faith, and that inordinate fear has no place for one who rests in the Lord. Christ is the Lord of Creation: we can learn to trust in Him. We pray for the graces to trust in the Providence of God for all.



THE MYSTERIOUS PURPOSE OF CREATION

“All things were created through Him and for Him.” (Col. 1:16)

It is not unusual when standing under a starry sky, to wonder: what is all of this for? The truth is, that it is for us. The glory of this universe is the setting in which we live out our lives in gratitude to the Father. Christ joins us in this desire, especially in the Eucharist, and it is there, in that universal prayer of the church, that the earth is given its final purpose and direction. We live not for an “Earth Day,” but for a “Heaven and Earth Day,” when the reign of Christ will restore unity to all things.



THE MYSTERIOUS RENEWAL OF CREATION

“Behold, I make all things new.” (Rv. 21:5)

What are we to make of the earth and its ways? What is the status of the earth and its creatures in the final judgment and the kingdom? In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis makes the bold suggestion that, “eternal life will be a shared experience of awe, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place...” Though theologians have offered various interpretations, one thing is clear: the life that we lived here on earth will be fulfilled, not dismissed. How we have loved God, neighbor and His creatures will be a testament to our faith. We pray for the courage and hope to live out our remaining days giving thanks to the Lord for the gift of His fragile earth, and the promise of eternal life.

Earth Day and Good Friday do not coincide on the calendar this year. But our Christian faith reminds us that without Christ, the earth is a tragic story of a frustrated people who glimpse in its splendor the handiwork of an architect, but long in their hearts for an everlasting friendship with a Father. Turning to Christ, to the face of the one through whom all things were made and the one through whom we find eternal life, let us once again propose Christ to a world so much in need.