

Views from the Pews: Preaching from the book of nature

All books can be understood only when we can relate them to what we already know. For example, Jesus' experience of God as a compassionate father figure informed his public teaching ministry. He taught from nature by starting from the natural world of his hearers, leading to a previously unknown and general message about an accessible, loving and forgiving God. He talked about the natural beauty and value of wild lilies and sparrows to people who possessed nothing of value, and who felt that they were themselves devalued by the legalistic tone of contemporary Judaism and the contempt of its leaders for those who failed to keep the Law.

Others have no problem finding counter-examples from nature to support their contention that there is no God, or at least, that any God that might exist could not be much like the one proclaimed by Christianity. For example, the female ichneumonid wasp inserts her eggs under the skin of a caterpillar, which then hatch and develop into grubs that slowly eat their victim alive from the inside. For believers who cannot reconcile that with the old idea of a perfect creation made by a benevolent God, there is comfort in deeper studies of the many contemporary books on science and religion, especially those searching for understanding of God's actions in creation.

The early Christians faced a huge mental shift in their efforts to adjust their understanding of God's actions through Judaism in the light of their experience of God's actions in Christ. We are in the same position. The mental shift required of us, to adjust our understanding of scripture in the light of science, is just as profound and disturbing to many. We have the tools if we are prepared to invest in serious study of *both* scripture and nature, and to develop a whole new suite of metaphors to convey eternal truths to a new, more secular generation. Since the process of defining Christianity took at least 500 years and involved a huge upheaval and endless disputes, we should expect the parallel process in our own time also to be time-consuming and controversial. Rational faith is needed now more than ever.

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