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Would Jesus be an environmentalist?

Carol Meyer | Apr. 5, 2011 Eco Catholic

The bracelet slogan, WWJD, popularized the notion of asking what Jesus would do in various situations. I think it?s worth pondering what his response might be to the critical issue of Earth care were he in the flesh today. Because environmental degradation wasn?t a problem in his day, Jesus said very little about the human relationship to the natural world. But we can certainly make some assumptions based on his values, teachings, and actions. And since the church seeks to act in his name under the guidance of his Spirit, I would like to think we are listening to Christ as our church leaders make pronouncements about the urgency of caring for the Earth.

Unfortunately, many Christians see little connection between the health of the Earth and the mission of Christ. Historically, much theological and spiritual emphasis was given to fleeing the world and putting one?s sole hope in life after death. Thus the world had little value in itself. It was merely the backdrop for the great drama of personal salvation, a purely spiritual endeavor.

And maybe because a thriving planet provided the basic support necessary for the spiritual quest, it was taken as a given and didn?t need to be theologized about. But now in the wake of a dying or extremely ill planet, we are suddenly realizing that God?s dream can?t materialize without the aid of the natural world.

When we examine the life and teachings of Jesus, he certainly spoke up boldly about the critical issues of his day. He proclaimed that his mission was to bring glad tidings to the poor, liberty to captives and release to prisoners (Luke 4:18). He was concerned for the sick, downtrodden, and anyone oppressed by unjust systems. The whole environmental tragedy is rife with injustices?the rich exploiting the earth for their greed at the expense of the poor and powerless who bear the heaviest load of negative consequences. Jesus would never have sanctioned or been silent about that.

We all know the famous last judgment passage in Matthew 25 where Jesus makes the feeding, housing, and clothing of those in need the criteria for salvation. In our day, the stakes are raised to a much higher collective level, beyond just individual actions. By every unsustainable personal or societal choice, we choose to create more deserts and starvation, more impure and scarce water, more erratic devastating storms, etc., that will harm millions of people and other sentient beings. By every sustainable choice, we choose actions that will contribute to the feeding, housing, and clothing of our fellow human being. We don?t have to guess at what position Jesus would take. We know he would be speaking out for a more committed stewardship of the planet, even if it means sacrifice and dying to self.

Jesus lived close to the land and drew the images for his parables from creation. It is unthinkable that the Christ who loved God so deeply did not also love all that God had made. If we grieve over the current irredeemable losses to the grandeur of creation, surely that is nothing compared to the One who knows the divine value of what we are destroying. Jesus could not have known God so intimately had he not had intimate rapport with the natural world.

Were he alive today, I?m certain that Jesus would be outspoken in challenging the powers that be and each one of us regarding the pillage of the Earth. And no doubt he would be in great trouble as he was in his lifetime--

vilified, condemned, marginalized, and characterized as radical and extreme. And yes, perhaps killed for speaking truth to power, as happens to many of the prophets. Surely we should be unafraid and willing to risk a little more too.

I believe our master Jesus walks beside us every step of the way as we seek to find ways to live sustainably and in partnership with creation. May we be true to him and call upon his wisdom and power in this great work.

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