

MOTHER EARTH



By Mother Earth my Lord be praised,
Governed by you, she has upraised
What for our life is needful.
Sustained by you through every hour,
She brings forth fruit and herb and flower.

During the conference in Assisi with Father Richard Rohr last May, we were encouraged to go and see a statue in the Basilica that gave a fresh attitude to the source of the Holy Spirit. St Francis is bending down to the earth and feeling the Spirit coming from there, rather than, as a dove, from the sky. This perception is expressed in the Mother Earth verse in the Canticle of the Creatures; the fruitfulness of the Earth sustains us with food and the gift is from God, hence his awareness and gratitude. Francis understood the unity and interdependence of all life and praised God constantly for his provision. This print, a copy of which I found in Assisi illustrates the same belief, and shows him thanking and praising God for plants and flowers.

Francis would have been familiar with the story of the Garden of Eden in Genesis Chap. 2, v.8. 'And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground - trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle

of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.' The scene is one of abundance and fruitfulness. Later the garden of Gethsemane, is the setting for our Lord's agony and betrayal; a place of fertility for his self-giving. Again, in Revelation Chap. 22 he would have known; 'Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.' Francis grew up in rural Umbria and became an early ecologist; but more than that – he felt the unity of God with Nature and gloried in the relationship, and calling the elements Brother Sun, and Sister Moon, as well as all forms of life around him being part of it - birds, animals and fish.

It is suggested that we need radical conversion to see that the Universe is pregnant with God, the mirror of God, that 'All is Gift'. This is exactly what he experienced; we need to start each day with thanks and awareness of simple essentials. Francis leads us – he sees the miracle of life in all its forms, and the Earth praising God. He also sees that we need to tread lightly on Mother Earth, to live simply.

Since those early times many thinkers have realized how dependant we are on our Planet Earth. Richard St. Barbe Baker (1889-1982), forester and environmental activist, worked throughout the world to prevent encroaching of deserts (Sahara) and was an instigator of Organic agriculture. Reading his books prompted me to work for his organisation 'The Men of the Trees' in Arborea, exhibitions, and education of children in tree planting. We gave demonstrations in schools and were thanked later by the children for making a mess with compost and pots in their classrooms! Recently 'Forest Schools' teach children in the open air about Nature; the Pre-School in Headington Quarry does this weekly, weather permitting, and they learn about wildlife and its needs in a local wood.

Rachel Carson's book 'The Silent Spring' (1962) influenced me greatly; she saw the problems of eroding our precious topsoil and facilitated the ban of the pesticide DDT in 1972. Scientist James Lovelock has been highly influential with his theory of Gaia, Mother Earth. This proposes that organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings on Earth to form a self - regulating, complex

system that contributes to maintaining conditions to life on the planet. Topics include how the biosphere and the evolution of life forms affect the stability of global temperature, ocean, atmosphere and other environmental variables that affect the habitability of Earth.

All this has inspired me to study and work in gardens. Living with my husband in Ghana and Nigeria, I saw different conditions and climate from those in Britain. Making trees and shrubs from cuttings was highly rewarding; leaves appeared rapidly! In the 1970's I studied for the RHS Diploma and learned about the soils, acid and alkaline, and all aspects of good practice. There were golden rules; never bury topsoil, and never bring subsoil to the surface! We studied the effects of temperature, light, drainage, and the art of making compost. Our double digging trials (also known as 'bastard trenching') were fairly exemplary, and the sides of the trench correctly vertical. At that time there was only limited knowledge of the dangers of chemicals; since then this has improved, though people are still tempted to take 'shortcuts'.

My own garden is mainly organic, as are those I have designed. A book that influenced me was 'How to have a green thumb without an aching back' (1955) by Ruth Stout; it advised generous applications of home-made compost and manure to feed the ground as bare soil dries out quicker. Where we lived in Sussex, the Arun River used to inundate the floodplain and carry off our nurturing compost and manure. I worked as a garden designer/consultant on a number of interesting projects, including a lochside garden in Scotland, an Egg Packing Station, a College quadrangle, a school, and a number of private gardens. Advice was needed on a regular basis; I visited gardens in different seasons and worked alongside the gardeners, learning from them for 20 years.

Green issues are now high on the list of priorities for the World, and each new generation of school children is educated to value and preserve our inheritance. Climate change is accepted as a problem that we cannot allow to progress, and we all make efforts to conserve energy, and recycle. It affects our whole outlook; equally important is avoiding pollution of air, land and water. Organic farming has gained ground, and we are learning that it should not be our demands for perfectly formed fruit that lead opinion, but the right way to farm. On a visit to a project in Zambia in 1993 as supporters of a small NGO run by Quakers, we saw how farming standards were being raised with

irrigation and mulching. Micro-credit schemes are successful, especially when small amounts of money are lent to women to run their own farms; they are the ones who return the loans!

Brother Sam SSF gave Oxford Area a talk in February on the Environment and Ecology which I found inspiring. Referring to the soil and land he said that God does not do rubbish! So it is up to us. Hilfield has a number of opportunities for participation as well as retreat, and sets a wonderful example in husbandry.

Francis was deeply concerned for the poor and hungry, as Our Lord had been. As Franciscans today we are appalled to hear of suffering, drought and starvation in many parts of the world. A current Christian Aid campaign to raise funds has the slogan 'Enough food for everyone IF ...' meaning if we, in the rich areas, share with those who do not have enough – people need not go hungry. Christian Aid has joined together with a group of charities including Tearfund, CAFOD, OXFAM, Save the Children and others to create a campaign to tackle the world's biggest problem: hunger. This is the same idea as in Acts, where goods and funds were shared between the early Christians in Jerusalem.

There are 'straws in the wind' of hope. Recently I sat in a waiting room at a hospital looking on to a planted courtyard. A sign read 'Please do not go outside. We have blackbirds nesting'. A quality magazine called 'Resurgence' describes its subjects as environment, activism, social justice, arts and ethical living. Its editor is Satish Kumar whose views and ambitions would be close to the heart of St. Francis, and the articles are highly informed and relevant to Mother Earth.

The Parish here, Holy Trinity Headington Quarry, has an initiative for 2013 of 'Earthing Faith; this is to help us reflect on God through our connection as human beings with all of nature. This, in turn, will help us to discover and grow in closeness with God who lives at the heart of all living things and whose immanence shimmers through all creation. A vital offshoot is to live in more sustainable ways for the sake of humanity.' (Parish leaflet) Although I am not a regular shopper at Tesco, I am impressed with the design of their 'Bag for Life' which has a fine illustration of the 'Tree of Life', bearing much fruit; the branches are homes to birds, while fish swim nearby, and little creatures

abound under the roots. This is telling the same story as Francis's Cantic of the Creatures.

Having stared on this subject, it is hard to stop as there are so many examples. I cannot resist a final one; Sir George Trevelyan (1906-96) lectured and gave courses on Earth as a living creature. He supported the Findhorn Foundation in Forres (as did Eve Balfour with the Soil Association) and promoted New Age ideas. At Attingham College, through the Wrekin Trust and his books he encouraged and inspired numbers of people with the importance of spiritual perception.

For Francis, the Earth truly was his Mother, and when he was dying he asked to have his clothes taken off so that he could lie, naked, on the ground. Such was his relationship with God and his trust. His words were 'I have done what was mine to do; may Christ teach you what is yours'.

Nell Slocock, March 2013.