

Monastic Scribe LVIII: September 15, 2023

ASK THE BEASTS

Peace be to you in this season of Creation! Oh, you did not know that this was the Season of Creation? Well, listen up! It was the Orthodox Church which started it. In 1989 Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch, established September 1st as the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation. Thus began the start of fifty days of a season ending with the feast of Saint Francis on October 4th. Pope Francis accepted this season for the Roman Catholic Church in 2015 and then many Protestant Churches did the same.

How do you observe a season? Well, my take on it is that many need to undergo a conversion. It is not enough to merely be more serious about recycling or cutting down carbon emissions. You have to see the world differently. You have to see everything and everyone as a subject, not an object. Animals, stones, needless to say also all human beings, are not things. They are all fellow creatures of God. This is a particular challenge to Americans who live in a culture of individualism – my rights, my property, my way of doing things. But, as Christians, we believe the common good must at times supersede my individual good.

Sister Elizabeth Johnson CSJ is a retired theologian from Fordham University. In 2015 she wrote a book called “Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love.” The title is based on a passage in the Book of Job in the Hebrew Scriptures (Job, 12: 7-10). Job has been in debate with his friends who insist he must be guilty of offending God. Job challenges them to abandon their rigid certitude about how the world works and tells them to look to another source of wisdom. Job declares:

“Ask the beasts and they will teach you; the birds of the air and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of every being.”

We have dominated the rest of the creation and used it for our economic well-being. It would seem that creation has had enough and is rebelling against us. The seas, the winds, the rains, the physical bodies of the cosmos all are damaged. All of creation is connected, related, made to harmonize with every other part. We

Monastic Scribe LVIII: September 15, 2023

are part of that creation and our bodies and minds need to be in harmony with the rest of creation. Indigenous people have known this. The Celts knew it. We are part of a cosmic ecosystem that demands the unity and harmony of humans with each other, with the material world, with God, and with ourselves. “No man (sic) is an island,” said the poet. What we do to the world we do to ourselves.

I believe this unity and inter-connectedness goes even deeper. White male supremacy has subdued other human beings in slavery. Patriarchy has kept women in domination. Secularity has cut humans off from the sense of the sacred and the fullness of their own being. Our own self-doubt has led to anti-Semitism and put-down of “other” groups. We are adrift because we have lost our oneness, our connections. And, right now, it can most easily be seen in our destruction of the natural environment. In destroying the rich biodiversity of the natural world, we have destroyed part of ourselves. In amassing so much material wealth we have contributed to the poverty of so many other peoples.

We need a conversion. We need to simplify our lives and live in harmony with nature. Perhaps the present age is a time of transition and we are given the warning to wake up and pay heed to what we have done. Technology, AI, modern communications all should help us, assist us, not dominate us. Put your cell phone away and go take a walk in the natural world. Seek some silence and solitude. Pay attention to the people you vote for to see whether they care for the environment. Recognize the power of consumerism to dull your awareness of the real needs of society. Wake up! Be willing to change. That’s the conversion of which I speak.

Here is a way to celebrate these fifty days of the Creation Season and educate yourself to the conversion needed. Read (or read again) the Pope’s Encyclical Letter, “Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home” (2015). This will prepare you for the publication of the Pope’s follow-up message to be released on October 4th. Let’s do this together. I will be reading at: joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL

Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.