

8. POSTSCRIPT

8.1. Campaigning for wild places

On 23 November 2002 I marched with several thousand other people in protest against a proposal to build a huge international airport on the Cliffe marshes on the Hoo Peninsula, North Kent. My outrage at this planned development was rooted in my youth. In my school days I used to travel to these marshes to watch birds with other members of the Ornithological Society, accompanied by knowledgeable leaders. I valued the friendships and companionship of those days but also the introduction to wide horizons and abundant wildlife. Thousands of wading birds and ducks would fly over the Thames Estuary and settle on the mudflats. Near the close of my secondary education I cycled to one of the villages on the Peninsula for a kind of ‘retreat’, combining revision for examinations with preparation for National Service. The practice of seeking renewal in relatively wild places has stayed with me.

The protest march and subsequent rally gave little opportunity for exchanging thoughts with fellow marchers. I surmise that some shared my love of open spaces and wildlife for purposes of recreation and renewal. Others expressed their legitimate indignation at the planned destruction of their homes and villages – in some cases the erasure of a family history going back several generations. The drained marshland also provided some agricultural work. Present also was a sense of injustice at the assumption that economic considerations should override national and international measures to protect a first-class wildlife site. I would like to think that the gathering included some Christians (apart from my companion and me) for

whom all these motives were contained within an overarching faith and love towards God who created and redeems all creation.

The battle for places where nature is left relatively wild is waged ceaselessly at international, national and local levels. Countless campaigns are waged to withstand the constant onslaught on wild places by corporate industry and inappropriate development. The means used include lobbying leaders, writing in the press, staging demonstrations and taking part in non-violent direct action. Often results are achieved: projects are abandoned or modified. Even where success eludes the campaigners, a voice has been raised in defence of wildness. Christian participation in such movements is a valid expression of the Church's mission.

8.2. Christian Wilderness Values

We saw in the earlier chapters of this essay how the stories of the Israelites' wilderness wanderings, with all their attendant experiences, present the desert as a crucible for their emerging identity as a nation under God.

Through the long story of the Church these same stories have been a model of God's dealings with God's people. The biblical and Christian wilderness philosophy bases itself on the divine revelation of which Christ is the centre. It affirms that God created and owns the wilderness, and can be found there. The spiritual warfare which may take place in the wilderness starts with the faith that Jesus has already engaged with the forces of evil, and has decisively and finally overcome them through his death and resurrection.

The value of wildness within a Christian world view assumes a transcendent God who became human in Christ and who is now working out the redemption of all things through him. Places where nature is, as far as

possible, left undisturbed are important for both ecological and spiritual reasons, especially because God the Creator is at work there. Times spent in wilderness conditions can make us open to God's revelation, test our true motivation, and help us through prayer to appropriate his victory over threats to his creation and to our own well-being. The spiritual value of wilderness derives from its creation by God, and God's presence within it. The knowledge of that spiritual value should be a Christian contribution to the drive for its preservation.

The contemporary crisis for the earth presents us with another perspective. The wild places of the earth contain many thousands of species, including unknown sources of food and medicine for humans, quite apart from their intrinsic value. The spiritual value of wilderness sits side by side with its ecological and utilitarian value within a Christian world view. Not only the symbolic or interior wilderness, but its outward counterpart also is to be valued.

8.3. Dialogue, Common Ground and Witness

Walking, sojourns in the wild, and praying outdoors are for many people valuable parts of a Christian lifestyle. Others besides Christians also value such experiences. Some may be influenced by Christian ideas. Others may be pagan in their spiritual inclinations, or seekers after spiritual reality. In the stories of secular wilderness visionaries, relation to the land helps to cultivate a sense of the oneness of all life. In Thoreau's case this sense of participation in the earth community was intensified by his sojourn in a simple hut by Walden Pond. Another significant example is John Muir's

famous 'Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf'.¹ Such prolonged and intensive - not to say strenuous - 'wilderness' journeys are not for everyone. Needs and opportunities vary. Sallie McFague, writing from an American perspective, argues that, while large wilderness areas should be preserved for the benefit of wildlife, the need of people to experience 'wildness' can be met locally by providing pockets of wildness even in cities.² Bratton argues that all people need 'some exposure to creation, free from human tinkering and modification', in order to develop an appreciation of creation and understanding of God as Creator.³

To some is given an intuitive or mystical awareness of the harmony and interconnectedness of all things. Such a sense is in no way contrary to the Christian faith. Christianity sees God as immanent in nature as well as transcendent over it; the Logos or Word of God who became incarnate in Jesus is the ground of all being, and will one day restore all things.⁴ Christian mysticism can combine a biblical faith in the transcendent God with an intuition of the unity of all things in Christ.

The enjoyment and defence of wilderness, like other aspects of life where Christians join with others, present opportunities for dialogue and mutual understanding. These are the necessary preliminaries to verbal witness. We

¹ Muir 1916, cited in Oelschlaeger 1991, 188.

² McFague 1997, 125. However Michael S. Northcott (2000, 78) warns that the 'fetishization' of 'wild' nature can lead to the exclusion of traditional, nomadic peoples. Indigenous people themselves protest at being 'displaced in the name of conservation'. (*The Guardian*, 'Evicted fight back against nature parks', 10 September 2003.)

³ Bratton 1993, 275.

⁴ Jn 1:1-14; Acts 3:21; Rom 8:18-25.

commend Christianity by living with integrity in the world and being prepared, when the opportunity is given, to witness to our Christian faith, hope and love for God's creation. All this work must be undergirded by prayer: prayer for the cause, for fellow-workers, for the despoilers of wilderness, and for all God's creatures. The mainspring for all such activity is to be God's love for all God's creatures, human and non-human. Living in the consciousness of that love ourselves, we can offer ourselves as channels whereby it may reach God's human and non-human creatures.