

Nature and liturgy

First Jews then Christians felt a strong connection between human beings and the world in which they live. The psalms and Genesis are an excellent example of this. Liturgical prayer is grafted on to the deep unity between human beings and nature. Water is used for Christian rebirth in Baptism. Two humble foods, fruit of the earth, bread and wine, become in the Eucharist the true Body and Blood of Christ for our salvation. Personal and community responsibility for nature. The instruction we can draw from the Liturgy of the Hours. True harmony is a value to be regained. Time, and its flow through the seasons, interpreted as a gift from the Father.

Poetry, sculpture, art and the literature of all the ages speak to us of a particular relationship between human beings and nature. We are immersed in nature, we live in the midst of it, and we have a relationship with it which is now peaceful, now conflictual, but always indispensable.

Landscapes of bounteous plenty for many ages of history, the source of disquiet or of inspiration in songs of romantic culture, a forest of symbols for nineteenth-century poetry; nature has always attracted and inspired us with its mysteries and its beauty, with its uncontrollable forces and the endless questions it provokes.

Trees and mountains, fountains and animals were transformed into deities as the human spirit searched for contact with the entirely Other; the courses of the stars and their position in the heavens inspired scientists and poets, and guided the pathways of the centuries; the wisdom of the ancients searched the mysteries of nature, and if

their conclusions were affected by instruments that still needed perfecting, their intuition served as the foundation of each successive research.

So it is not surprising that in prayer also, in its relationship with the Absolute, human beings met with nature, with all its elements, with a dance already in progress - and they entered into it.

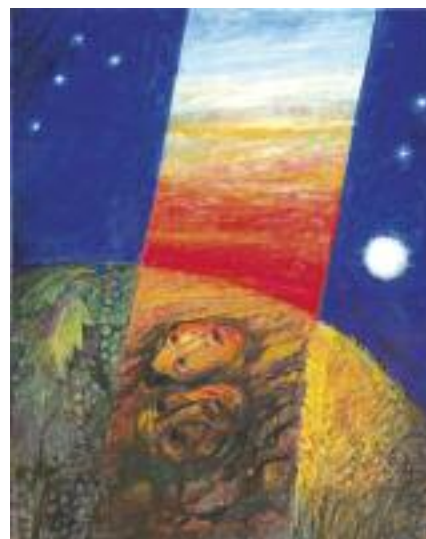
First the Jewish then the Christian liturgy re-echoed a relationship with nature: it was second nature for our forefathers, and for us a gift to be discovered.

The psalms, which have such a prominent part in Jewish and Christian prayer, are interwoven with elements of this relationship: trees, forests, light, darkness, animals of all kinds, seas and springs of water become now protagonists, now witnesses in the encounter between God and his creature, between human beings and their Creator. Nature, for Jewish and then Christian believers, ceased to be an indecipherable and rather capricious divinity, and became

a creature planned and willed by God.

Genesis, in poetic and evocative language, makes us contemplate God's action as he weaves and shapes creation. Everything that alarms or astonishes us – waters above the heavens, waters under the sky, seas and rivers, inexplicable phenomena,

This work by Sieger Köder, "The first rays of morning" represents the creation of the world through a Christological reading of John's Gospel: the light of Christ creates the world; from its contact with the earth the faces of Adam and Eve are formed; they are the image of all humanity. Their eyes search for light, because from it they receive life



rain and dew, all species of animals, trees and forests, the miracle of seed sown and generating new life...all this is not due to a "cause" but to the work of a creator who made order out of chaos, to a gaze of love which contemplated the work of his hands and saw that "it was good". It was good, harmonious and ordered, and by its existence it sang the beauty of God and his loving providence. In this concert, human beings appeared after all the other creatures, coming forth from God's hand as something "very good", called to share the joy of the Lord, who rests among all this beauty. Up to this point, Genesis is the recorded wisdom of those who see God at work at nature's beginnings, the same God who enters history and calls them to a new life, leads them, by paths which are at times broken and have to be reconstructed, to a relationship which sin has interrupted and which the love of the creator never wearies of seeking to re-establish. If we think of Christian prayer, especially liturgical prayer, we find ourselves in a special kind of school: the words which are put on our lips and the gestures which accompany them speak of a wonderful unity between us and all creation; and if we let them work within us, they teach our hearts, little by little, to recover our humility as creatures, and the joy of being part of a given rhythm, and of a dance which is the same as that of heaven. Water, springing up and source of life, or uncontrolled and cause of death, weaves its symbolism into the Sacrament of



Christian rebirth: we are baptised, that is, immersed in the waters of Christ's death to re-emerge in his resurrection. The font is a tomb, and at the same time a living womb which generates new children for the Church. Who could not be amazed at such a simple and sublime beauty? No complicated symbols to decipher here, needing learned commentaries, but essential experiences of elements which accompany our life, which will declare themselves to those who listen. Light and darkness signify belonging to Christ or being far from him; bread and wine, the fruits of nature and the work of human hands, become elements of the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood, nourishment for eternal life; and salt, indispensable for food, and oil, bringer of joy, become the signs and vehicles of the presence of the Spirit who strengthens and makes holy. We could analyse each single element in all its particulars, and we would find there a single

constant: the natural element, or an element transformed by human action, sings the beauty of God and his Fatherly providence, hymns the salvation freely bestowed, and tells us our place in the scheme of things. Like gardeners, we are not called to bring things into existence but to care for their beauty; just as the conductor of an orchestra is not called to create voices or instruments, but can (and must) co-ordinate the harmony, bringing out the potential in each single part of the whole. But how can all this speak to us today, men and women of the post-modern generation, children dressed in artificial fibres, dwellers in cities in perpetual flight from ourselves, dreaming of uncontaminated paradise yet unable to renounce any commodities? Perhaps this is a challenge. Christian prayer, particularly the liturgy, takes us back to essentials, The rhythm of the Liturgy of the Hours, for example, is a power-



Psalm 126:5 "Those who are sowing in tears will sing when they reap." Painting by Bencjon Benn (1905-1989)

ful teacher for anyone who goes to its school. Born of the desire to praise the whole time, and at all times, its rhythm follows nature's hours. Sunrise, sunset, light and darkness give praise its rhythm, recall Creation and the Resurrection, entrust to God the time of living and of rest, enter with him into the darkness, awaiting a new day. Hymns and psalms codify natural elements that are not simply symbols, but true protagonists of praise, and our educators.

If we glance at Sunday Lauds, for example, "the Lord's Day and lord of days" we find there a real dance of creation: all things are called and gathered by the voice of the psalmist; clouds and sun, rain and dew, ice and cold, birds and fish, wild beasts and sea monsters...everything is invited to join in a great chorus which praises and blesses the Most High.

Then it the turn of human beings to praise God for all he has created, but at the same time –

and here comes the marvellous movement of the liturgy – we praise along with all that has been created. Like members of a choir greater than ourselves, we sing to the God who is indescribable, whose voice we cannot hear, but which is compared to the voice of mighty waters, to powerful thunder. This voice was made flesh in Jesus, it speaks with us: and the Church, Christ's living body of which he is the Head, repeats in the Spirit the ancient words, "Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise him in the heights!" Through the melody of the psalms and the beauty which sings the glory of God, little by little she teaches us to go out of ourselves to recognise the gifts and the Gift. "In the first light of dawn, clothed in light and silence, all things re-emerge from darkness, just as at the beginning of the world" – this is a beautiful hymn for Lauds. It reaffirms a truth that is ancient and ever new: taught by what we cele-

brate, we can recover unity with the whole of nature, that sense of harmony which the rhythm of our lives frequently destroys. And this unity is not just an aesthetic fact, it becomes a source of serenity, balance and joy, because it tells our hearts that we are not alone on the path of history, it tells us that everything that exists has a meaning outside itself, and that we are part of a greater design. It draws near to our technologists, who feel themselves masters of time; and perhaps it arises in those who pray, and give time back to God, and receive it like an ever-renewed gift, and who discover how to live in a rhythm greater than themselves, who join in the dance of heaven and so know how to embrace the sorrow of all the little ones of the world.

Sr. M. Laura Restelli

Sr. M. Laura Restelli

