

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel-St. Thomas More, NYC**  
**July 12, 2020 - Streaming Mass**  
**15th Sunday of Year A    Romans 8:18-23**

Today's reading from St. Paul's letter to the Roman asks the question, what is the vision, what is the "big picture" we have of nature, of life itself. Is this place, is this world wherein we find ourselves, simply a "vale of tears," a place of trial and testing to be crossed with grim determination in the hope of a better place when we die, or is there something more going on here than meets the eye? What might Paul mean by these words, "We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now." For St. Paul, there is a goal towards which all of nature, all creation is heading.

I would like to compare the works of two different Catholics, and the two markedly different viewpoints they took on life, to see where we stand in relation to the visions they present; to reflect on whether our faith is closer to the pessimism of our society, or to the confidence of St. Paul? One is the film director, Alfred Hitchcock; the other is the Jesuit priest, philosopher and scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who before his death on Easter Sunday, 1955, lived at St. Ignatius Loyola on 84<sup>th</sup> St. De Chardin tried to integrate the Scriptures with the discoveries of natural science. His particular effort was to show how the theory of evolution could be united with Christian faith. In the process he produced a dynamic, cosmic vision of how the risen Christ is present to all reality. He showed how Christianity has not only an individual dimension—Jesus and me—but a cosmic aspect as well.

Now, a word about the other Catholic, Alfred Hitchcock. Hitchcock was not a practicing Catholic, although he was buried from a Catholic church. The vision Hitchcock brought to American filmgoers was certainly not one illuminated by faith, but rather one steeped in the pervasiveness of evil. For Hitchcock, the threat of menace is everywhere. In one of his classic films, The Birds, the opening scene communicates a sense of danger, of disorder in nature. A woman is seated on a playground bench casually smoking a cigarette, listening to children inside the schoolhouse cheerfully singing away. But the film-viewer sees what she does not. Behind her, on the playground "jungle-gym bars," two birds appear, then two more, then two more, and two more, until finally the bars are covered with a swarm of menacing blackbirds. The birds are waiting to attack the children as they leave the schoolhouse.

For Hitchcock, the film is a metaphor of human beings taking nature for granted. And nature returns to take revenge, to strike back. Birds have been shot at, caged, poisoned, eaten; now it's their turn to get even. For Hitchcock, the film is a metaphor

of how we abuse the world around us; how we take it for granted, until it's too late. We strip our planet, we waste our resources, we create our ecological disasters. Then, years later we pay the price.

Consider how the 2014 Ebola epidemic began. Timber operations in a section of Western Africa leveled about 80% of the trees in the area. The upper branches had been the nesting grounds of bats, many of them infected by the virus. The bats then went on to make their nests closer to the ground. The loss of the forests brought infected wild animals and the infected bats into closer contact with human settlements. A little boy playing in his backyard near a hollow tree, heavily infested with bats, became infected. He was taken to the hospital and the infection spread from there. See this as a template for future epidemics and pandemics--how human beings disturb the natural habitats of non-human creatures, who then come in contact with humans for the first time, bringing a range of viruses never seen before. Global air transport increases the spread of disease. Everything is interconnected, a point Pope Francis made in his encyclical on the environment, "Laudato Si." If Hitchcock were around today to remake his classic film, he would probably call it "The Bats," not "The Birds."

The vision of Hitchcock is even more pessimistic. After the birds are finished attacking the children, they proceed to attack the remaining inhabitants of the town who are holed up in the village diner. The birds force the inhabitants out into the open, where they can pick and scratch them to death. Then, the camera distances itself from the scene. From several hundred feet above the ground, the viewer looks down upon the disaster unfolding below. The viewer is made to feel like some distant, pitiless god who watches indifferently at the mad scramble below. For Hitchcock, ours is a world of accident and disorder, one wherein prayer is useless. It is a thoroughly pessimistic, nihilistic vision of life, without any sense of purpose or meaning.

The vision of life that Pierre Teilhard de Chardin presents is rather different. De Chardin attempted to unite the theory of evolution with the revelation of the Scriptures, especially in light of those words of St. Paul where he speaks (most specifically in his letter to the Colossians) of all things ultimately being united in the risen Christ. What mattered for de Chardin about evolution was not so much where it started, but where it is headed—toward Christ, in Christ. All the stages of humanity's geological, anthropological and technological development are but stages that look to that final stage wherein the love of God will permeate all reality. The universe is still coming into being; it is unfinished; it is still unfolding. That is what we mean when we proclaim in the Eucharistic acclamation, "Christ will come again." De Chardin writes, "Some day after having harnessed with his technology the winds and the tides, man will discover love, and then for the second time he will truly have discovered fire." So,

Teilhard de Chardin's is a vision that is not heedless of the flecks and flaws of creation, of the evil in the world, but again for him, evil is not the full story. Hitchcock attempted to present the big picture on the silver screen with his pessimistic view of life. But de Chardin, rooted in the Christian faith, gives a truly big picture, a cosmic vision that has its destiny and fulfillment in the risen Christ.

So, having been baptized in Christ, we are empowered to face life with hope, with trust, with confidence. We are co-creators with God. Our efforts to build a better world, to shape a new humanity, are not mere feeble attempts to create something meaningful in an essentially meaningless world. The challenge for each of us is to realize that whatever I do is not just about me. Each of us is invited to work with God, to "build the earth," to play our own individual part in bringing creation to its fulfillment. In the Christian scheme of things, creation has a purpose, a direction, a goal, and we all have a part in achieving it.

In a few minutes we will pray that the bread and wine be transformed into the presence of the risen Christ. What that mystery ought to help us realize is that as we leave church, our efforts to make a better world in the coming week should have a Eucharistic dimension. We are called to transform the material elements, the activities, of our daily lives, so that the presence of Christ in all creation will shine through. Let us pray that we can accept that invitation, to realize that our efforts to "make something beautiful for God" in the words of St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta are no small achievement, but share in the very plan, the process, whereby all that is beautiful, good and loving is being brought to fulfillment in the risen, cosmic Christ. Let us seize and appreciate the dignity to which we have been called.