



Lessons from Nature

C.S. Lewis was decidedly wary about learning from nature. He wrote: *'If you take nature as a teacher she will teach you exactly the lessons you had already decided to learn; this is only another way of saying that nature does not teach.'* Nature, said Lewis, is ambivalent: *'There are worms in the belly as well as primroses in the wood.'* It is a salutary warning, for in 1999 Bruce Bagemihl published an earnest scientific tome entitled *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*, that investigated homosexual behaviour in some four hundred and fifty animal species. Here, readers are treated to page after page analysing the homosexual behaviour of penguins, monkeys, dolphins and other animals. Subsequent studies have dealt with homosexuality in Japanese macaques (a kind of monkey), as well as in the ruff (a kind of Arctic sandpiper).

These studies have all been riveting, no doubt, and some have attracted public funding for their educational worth, and have been taken seriously in American courts of law. It is, however, a somewhat perilous approach to ethics. A great many species practise infanticide, but so far I have not heard of a single learned professor of ethics, not even Peter Singer, advocate infanticide on the grounds that Father Grizzly Bears are prone to kill their own offspring. Nor has the most rabid feminist drawn attention to the fact that the female praying mantis devours her male counterpart.

For all that, the Bible does point to lessons that can be gleaned from nature. Proverbs 6 has a vigorous admonition to us all on the subject of diligence and organization: *'Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest'* (Prov. 6:6-8). More negatively, it is better to meet a she-bear robbed of her cubs than a fool in his folly (Prov. 17:12). Also, toiling for wealth is not wise for *'suddenly it sprouts wings, flying like an eagle toward heaven'* (Prov. 23:4-5). Linger over the red wine bottle is dangerous, for *'it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder'* (Prov. 23:31-32). Also, a man who strays from home is like a bird that strays from its nest (Prov. 27:8).

Some people are always demanding: *'The leech has two daughters; "Give" and "Give," they cry'* (Prov. 30:15). Such people are never satisfied. It is not our place of residence that defines our worth: *'The lizard you can take in your hands, yet it is in kings' palaces'* (Prov. 30:28). Most memorable of all, surely, is the simile: *'Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly'* (Prov. 26:11). We say that we learn from experience, but somehow we still manage to repeat our sins and errors.

Jesus too would look out upon the natural world, and draw lessons or illustrations from it. The birds of the air do not sow or reap or gather into barns, but God feeds them (Matt. 6:26). The grass of the field is here today and gone tomorrow, yet not even Solomon in all his royal finery could match the way in which God arrays the lilies of the field (Matt. 6:28-30). There is no place, therefore, for the kind of debilitating anxiety that in certain circumstances can easily overcome even the most committed Christian. The God of the Bible is the Lord of heaven and earth who governs his world so that not even a sparrow can fall to the ground apart from his will (Matt. 10:29-31).

Because this world is fallen and cursed, those who wish to are able to derive the wrong lessons from nature. Yet because this world is God's world, we can glean lessons from what is good in it – the activity of the ants and the beauty of the flowers. The discerning observer can also learn from what is wrong with the world – that there are people who are like leeches that suck us dry, or like dogs that learn nothing from experience.

C. S. Lewis probably overstates the case regarding lessons to be derived from nature. The poets could point in two directions. Tennyson spoke of '*nature red in tooth and claw*'; while Gerard Manley Hopkins declared that '*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.*' Both are true, because this world is God's world, and because this world is not as it once was due to human sin and rebellion. That is the first lesson to be derived from nature and, more certainly, from Scripture.

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