

Views From The Pews: How Christ's teaching exceeds nature

During his earthly ministry Jesus commented on many aspects of the natural life and social conventions he saw all around him. His responses always emphasised the over-ruling of undisciplined self-interest, which is possible only with the faith by which he lived himself.

Jesus extended the Mosaic prohibition of murder to the nursing of anger which may lead to it. The stoning of adulterous women is merely a human extension of various techniques long established by nature to protect a cuckolded male from perpetuating another male's genes; but Jesus advocated forgiveness and acceptance for her, on the grounds that a woman's life is worth more than her husband's fear of cuckoldry. The pack hierarchy of social animals such as wolves is well represented in human life, and Jesus even had to rebuke his own disciples for it.

He over-ruled the universal antipathy against parasites and social bludgers of all kinds with the simple command to love one another. He asked: what good is it if you love only those who love you, since even the scum of the earth (such as the tax-gatherers) do as much? He showed that "natural" human decency and the Ten Commandments are not enough: rather, he required the natural love normally limited to family to be extended to everyone, on the grounds that anyone who loves God is family. He over-ruled the ancient tribal rivalry between groups by his command to love our enemies. And finally, he exposed the universal compromises which ancient Judaism (and, still more so, institutional Christianity) has tended to condone in order to ensure corporate survival.

The one thing we never find in the natural world, and only rarely in ordinary human life, is complete and total abandonment of self-interest - that is, purely disinterested love, with no benefits either in descendants or in repaid favours. Even in the Bible, it is uncommon: Abraham was willing, although he was offered a ram in a thicket at the last minute (Gen 22:13). For Christians, the only perfect example is Jesus.

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