

# “Magic Realism” and Earth Healing

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 17 September 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Season of Creation 3A

**Contemporary Reading: *Letter to Noah’s Wife* by Maya C Popa;  
Revelation 12: 1-9 and 13-17a**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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What value does the book of Revelation have for us, especially in the face of ecological crises? My guess is that most of us have not spent too much time on the Bible’s last book. Some people of course have, including those looking for a special secret code to life and history, and those puzzling out different timetables for Christ’s second coming. Such interpreters however typically have little concern for ecology, and some even welcome signs of environmental apocalypse. Faced by the strangeness of John the Divine’s visions, we may therefore be tempted to dispense with the book altogether. Yet that would be a mistake. For, as this morning’s reading illustrates, truth and light can be received in the strangest places...

This reading is certainly dramatic, with strongly painted features. We have ‘*a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet and upon her head a crown of twelve stars*’, who is giving birth to a son. We have a majestic destructive red dragon, with ‘*several heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads*.’ We have war in heaven, with Michael and his angels. We have the gift of eagle’s wings for the woman, and the serpent spewing out a flood of water to carry her away. Can you imagine the impact on the first hearers of this text?

Today we are used to all kinds of such stories and imagery – from Star Wars to video games - produced daily through all kinds of media, with brilliant technological effects. Much of this is simply for entertainment. Yet we also have artists expressing themselves in similar ways, with multimedia unimaginable to John the Divine, also tapping into today’s existential hopes, fears, and struggles. For the book of Revelation is neither a curious aberration in the Bible nor an ancient relic with no parallels today. Rather, it is an expression of deep human imagination and re-envisioning of our lives and world. As such, it sits alongside literary and artistic genres such as fabulism, science fiction, surrealism and magic realism. For whilst we would do well not to approach our lives and world just on those terms, without them we are impoverished and unable to break free from the shackles of ‘ordinary’ human confinements.

This reading thus contributes at least three important elements to our understanding of God and our involvement in today’s great ecological challenges. Firstly, building on what Penny said last week, it encourages us to be imaginative storytellers. We might point to those contemporary writers often mentioned as exponents of ‘magic realism’. For magic realism has some resonances with the book of Revelation, as it is a style of literary fiction and art, which paints a realistic view of the world whilst adding magical elements.

The novelist David Lodge put it this way: magic realism is present *‘when marvellous and impossible events occur in what otherwise purports to be a realistic narrative’* — an effect especially associated with contemporary Latin American fiction (for example, Gabriel Garcia Marquez) but also encountered on other continents, for example in Günter Grass, Salman Rushdie, and Milan Kundera. *‘All these writers have lived through great historical convulsions and wrenching personal upheavals, which they feel cannot be adequately represented in a discourse of undisturbed realism.’*<sup>1</sup>

How can we speak in the face of ecological crises? Reason and good ethical teaching can only take us so far. We also need re-imagination and a harnessing of that beyond the merely rational. I was struck by this when a local artist approached us recently to use our building for choir rehearsals for a climate change focused artwork she has been producing.

*‘This’, she said, ‘is part of the new religion we need.’* Well, I said, *‘I am not so sure about that last bit. Surely we have quite enough religions already and religions are always somewhat ambiguous in what they can offer.’* However, I saw her point. Like many people, this artist has moved away from her Catholic upbringing, but, because of it, she knows the power of symbol and story. She contends, rightly, that unless we renew spiritual expressions, we will never transform our interrelationships with the wider environment of which we are a part.

Reason and good ethics are not enough. As continuing delays to act on well-aired issues shows, our ecological responses remain on the surface if we do not go deeply enough to effect change. As magic realists and other artists attest, this, like our Revelation reading, requires deeper imagination. Indeed, in terms of embodied action, that is part of the gift of those known as Deep Greens, who seek to name and relate to our world afresh: with creative art, symbol, and spirituality, as well as powerful resistance and new ways of living.

Secondly therefore, today’s reading challenges us to address our particular contexts in the light of the supra-rational. It is hardly alone in this. After all, among its many literary forms and genres, the Bible has many magic realist passages. Commentators, not least Jewish, thus point to how magic realism flows through the Torah: with, for example, in the book of Numbers, quail appearing when the people need meat; an abused donkey literally speaking out against her owner; and a wooden staff sprouting almonds.<sup>2</sup>

The book of Genesis can similarly be regarded as magic realism: some elements of which are clearly fictional from a modern perspective, but which still imparts truth through its cultural and religious imagination and profound insights into the meaning of life.<sup>3</sup> Strictly speaking, the book of Revelation is more in the apocalyptic literary genre. Yet it too has vital aspects of imagination to name and reshape our lives and world.

In Revelation chapter 12, the original context was the depth of Roman imperial oppression. Symbolically therefore, the woman bearing child may represent the Church, God’s redeemed people, adorned with the sun (Christ) and the moon (Moses), and the crown of twelve stars (the apostles). The earliest hearers would also have identified the dragon with Satan, embodied in the Roman Empire’s fearsomely destructive powers. However, the genius of such imaginative symbolism is that it can also be applied to many other oppressive situations.

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<sup>1</sup> in *The Art of Fiction* (1992)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sophiastreet.com/2017/07/07/magical-realism-2/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.berfrois.com/2012/12/a-supreme-fiction-ronald-hendel/>

Indeed, the cosmic elements of angelic struggle remind us that deep conflicts of existence operate on all levels of being, involving all *'the powers and principalities'* of life, including psycho-spiritual elements, as well as reason and good ethics. As such, this passage can also help name our contemporary ecological evils, and ways out. For, in Revelation 12, is the role of the Earth itself in salvation. When the serpent does its worst, and the flood threatens to sweep her away, and destruction seems complete, the text (v.16) is explicit: *'But the earth came to the help of the woman.'* In other words, it is not simply humanity, but God's Creation as a whole that is a key player in history and ecological change.

To find such meaning in Revelation 12 we may be helped by Ángeles Santos's painting *Un Mundo (One World)*.<sup>4</sup> This is an extraordinary piece of work, produced by a then 17 year old girl, which, in Madrid's famous Museo Reina Sofia, literally, and rightly, ranks alongside the greatest paintings of Picasso and Salvador Dalí. Like the Surrealists and the Magic Realists, and the book of Revelation before them, Santos' *Un Mundo* speaks into a world which was not listening to reason and which was betraying good ethics with monstrous evils. Like Revelation 12, it speaks of how hope may be found in the planet itself, here presented as a very surrealist cube, and with powerful feminist cosmic features. Indeed, in some ways its angels complement the more masculine biblical figures of Michael and his army. In *Un Mundo*, the spiritual defenders are female, with long hair, floating around the earth and lighting it with the moon. In the corner too, we see a small group of women, with large heads and hairless; two are playing musical instruments (a harp and a flute, and, from their different sizes, quite possibly they are mothers and daughters. Earth's healing is thus related to reimagining our symbols, and re-envisioning the vital gifts of women and the maternal, not least those of the Earth itself.

Thirdly, like *Un Mundo*, Revelation 12 prompts us to shape our lives and world differently. For the value of such art and spirituality is in nurturing resistance and hope. Indeed, it is a commonplace to observe that so much of contemporary magic realism is grounded in critiques of colonialism. Through such imaginative, even fantastical, story and symbol, the 'ordinary' world of colonial, capitalist, and bourgeois, oppressions can be relativised and interrogated, and those things who have been 'othered' can find voice and agency. This has always been part of the book of Revelation's significance, providing resistance and hope in the first and second centuries, in response to Roman imperialism; later in response to religious oppressions, and in some places, in the past and still today, in response to racism and colonialism. In our times, perhaps we can therefore see this in relation to ecological crisis: as a kind of book of extinction rebellion?

To draw to conclusion, in the poem *Letter to Noah's Wife*, that we also heard earlier,<sup>5</sup> Maya C.Popa asks how we are to find hope and act? Maya relates how, like most of us, she lives with a certain desperation about the climate crisis now manifestly worsening dramatically before us, and how she feels so inadequate in her response. Significantly, she also sees this as related to the need for re-working of symbol and spirituality. As she puts it: *"who will be the one to break the myth?"* Like Revelation 12, Ángeles Santos, and many magic realist voices, Maya's response is also beyond the mere rational and ethical, and it too points to the importance of the feminine and the recentring of the hitherto 'othered'. Thus the poet asks questions of Noah's wife, of whom so little has been written. In words we might easily echo, she cries out:

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/mundo-world-0>

<sup>5</sup> <https://poets.org/poem/letter-noahs-wife>

*Noah's wife, I am wringing  
my hands not knowing how to know  
and move forward. Was it you  
who gathered flowers once the earth  
had dried? How did you explain the light  
to all the animals?*

How do we explain the light to all the animals, and open ourselves to share in Earth's own healing? Let me offer some final thoughts from the great American farmer and eco-prophet, Wendell Berry. He writes <sup>6</sup> that one of the texts '*that has come to seem to most valuable*' is also from Revelation, from chapter 4 verse 11:

*You are worthy, O God, to receive glory and honour and power:  
for you have created all things, and for your pleasure they are and were created.*

Berry rightly says that this '*proposes an indispensable standard for the stewardship both of things in use and useless things set aside from use*'. For - like Ángeles Santos, the magic realists and other poets and priests of the imagination - this affirms that what we are told is the only possible reality is not the truth.

In that angelic light, may we therefore be strengthened in our resistance to ecological and other oppressions, and may we rejoice in the hope of earth, and of cosmic, healing. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> What Are People For? Essays by Wendell Berry, 1990, pp.110-101.