

DAILY BREAD

“Grain of Hope : Slice of Heaven”

HARVESTING ART : The Great Chain of Being

Queen Mary's Psalter (c. 1320)

Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berri June: the Harvest c. 1412-1416

Heaven and earth laid out for a duke to see:
A hierarchy of being cut in three.

The hay is low: first marvel at that clear
High-arching cobalt, that celestial sphere

Circling in pure geometry. Below:
the Paris of bishop and king; a show

Of turrets, intricate spires against the sky;
On the silver Seine, one boat is passing by:

A high outer wall divides and shields
This stately city from cropped trees and fields

Where, caught in graceful work-pose, peasants flail
And reap with scythes. Low in this ordained scale

Is what was living grass, now tamed and cramped
In a line of hay-heaps, each apparently stamped

From one round mould. Man (it is man!) subdues
The natural world to his own ends and use.

Just outside
this limpid image, just beyond the smooth surface
of vellum, wolves lurk. Dark forests creep
towards the fields; whole harvests are blighted
and hunger bites. Even within the city,
with its crammed dwellings, twisting narrow streets,
people tremble at the recent massacre
of the Black Death.

Diane Pacitti 2020



Above. Drawing of the Great Chain of Being (*L. Scala naturae*) by Diego Valades (1579).

Left. Les Très Riches Heures du duc de Berri is perhaps the finest surviving example of manuscript illumination on fine parchment in the late Gothic style. This page illustrates peasants performing agricultural work in the month of June (1412-1416)

The Great Chain of Being depicted in the image had its roots in Plato and Aristotle and constituted a firm framework for medieval minds. God was in his heaven with the angels, humans, animals, plants and minerals sequentially below. This hierarchy turns out to be extraordinarily persistent, and perhaps accounts for some of our inability to outgrow structures and language which are no longer useful. Even as the divine right of kings steadily lost credibility, Carl von Linné remained heavily influenced by the Chain in devising his classification system for all living things. This is full of references to ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ which we continue to use, and even involved renaming himself Carl Linnaeus to fit the system.

Just outside the bucolic hierarchy, though, wolves lurk – kept in their place by shielding, flailing, dividing and subduing. 21st century wolves are not so much the howling, fanged variety of medieval times. Today they look like antibiotic resistance, loss of pollinators, plagues of locusts, and zoonotic diseases. Over 50 such diseases are responsible for 2.5 billion cases of illness and 2.7 million deaths across the globe each year. These illnesses include rabies, toxoplasmosis, Q fever, Dengue fever, avian influenza, Ebola, anthrax, and now Covid 19 ¹.

Human behaviour rooted in human worldviews is responsible for zoonotic outbreaks. In medieval times, cities that encouraged rats enabled transmission of bubonic plague. Today, destruction of habitat forces species into closer proximity with each other and with humans. Intensive animal farming – including wet markets where many different species come into close contact, and monocultures such as battery mink and chicken farms - blurs the boundaries further.

On a finite planet it is less and less possible to keep pushing these wolves out of the picture with drugs, pesticides and vaccines. As vaccines for Covid 19 edge towards mass rollout, the WHO cautions that in this ‘new normal’ the world also needs to focus on personal behaviour, support for health systems and international cooperation. Nothing to disagree with there, but much more radical change is needed in the way we access land, interact with other species, and feed ourselves. Human health can no longer be seen in isolation from planetary health. Other worldviews are available. For example, philosopher Ken Wilber proposes a Great Nest of Being, rooted in the perennial philosophy of ultimate unity. Perhaps this kind of view might involve less struggle to subdue and more cooperation with natural systems.

“In our crowded world of 7.8 billion people....we have created a global, human-dominated ecosystem that serves as a playground for the emergence and host-switching of animal viruses, especially genetically error-prone RNA viruses ²”

1. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/zoonotic-diseases-why-are-infections-from-animals-so-dangerous-to-humans>
2. Escaping Pandora's Box – Another Novel Coronavirus. The New England Journal of Medicine, March 2020



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