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INTRODUCING BONAVENTURE

PART 2

THE TREE OF LIFE

SLIDE 1 TITLE

SLIDE 2

Bonaventure's *Soul's Journey into God* shows that everything in Creation is a sign of God - a theophany – and everything in the world and in our own human faculties leads us towards God – from which everything flows in an excess of love.

If Creation is a song, a performance, how can we become better performers? How can we escape the distractions that prevent us from seeing God in All and prevent us from following the calling of love that draws us to the transcendent God?

As Bonaventure wrote

...the mirror presented by the external world is of little or no value unless the mirror of our soul has been cleaned and polished. (p. 56. Quotations from: Bonaventure, translated by Ewert Cousins with contributions by Ignatius Brady, *The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St Francis*, Paulist Press, 1978.)

Bonaventure's *Tree of Life* is a form of spiritual exercise. It is a text for meditation which helps us to enter into the gospel story to experience the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ and to find God in our own souls – through Imagination.

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This is a book aimed at a wider audience than *the Soul's Journey*. It became a popular text and it was much imitated.

Like *The Soul's Journey*, *the Tree of Life* has a very strong structure – and it's a structure, like a cathedral, with many depths and hidden patterns.

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The *Tree of Life* is described in the *Revelation of St John* - the tree with fruit for each month, and leaves which are for the healing of the nations – but, as we will see, this is just one facet of a complex image.

In the New Testament the Heavenly City is somehow nowhere and everywhere, apparently outside time – and yet -

...on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:2 KJV)

This is beyond time – and yet has fruit for each month!

This image of the tree is a very ancient symbol with its origins in the Holy of Holies of the Temple – but even in the Old Testament its origins and meaning are mysterious. The Holy of Holies seems to have represented the pattern of Creation – the ideal form of Creation as a Unity. To the medieval mind the perfection of the Cosmos is imagined as a sphere, but in the Hebrew tradition it is a cube.

We will see that this imagery is all about the Cosmos – and that the story is about our relationship with the cosmos and God.

Within the Holy of Holies are said to have been the two cherubim guarding the Ark of the Covenant – and the great candlestick, the Menorah – which Clement of Alexandria, writing in the second century AD, but drawing on the Jewish philosopher Philo from over 100 years earlier, explains represented the cosmos.

The lamp, too, was placed to the south of the altar of incense: and by it were shown the motions of the seven planets, that perform their revolutions towards the south. For three branches rose on either side of the lamp, and lights on them; since also the sun, like the lamp, set in the midst of all the planets, **dispenses with a kind of divine music to those above** and to those below.

(Clement of Alexandria, The Stromata or Miscellanies, Book V Chapter VI, in The Anti-Nicene Fathers, Volume 2 T & T Clark, Edinburgh, reprinted by Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.)

Sometimes the Menorah is associated with the Tree – but others see the Tree as a distinct object in the Holy of Holies – perhaps associated with Wisdom –

The image of the Tree by the River in the New Testament Revelation of St John is derived from the Old Testament prophecies of Ezekiel:

And by the river upon the bank thereof, on this side and on that side, shall grow all trees for meat, whose leaf shall not fade, neither shall the fruit thereof be consumed: it shall bring forth new fruit according to his months, because their waters they issued out of the sanctuary: and the fruit thereof shall be for meat, and the leaf thereof for medicine.

...but the Tree is also in the Garden of Eden...where the river divides into four and flows into the world...

Symbols which merge into deeper symbols.

Before we even begin to follow the story we are in a numinous setting – if we are aware of the multi-dimensional strangeness of the Image of the Tree – which is part of the symbolism of Paradise – which is also the Temple – which is also the New Jerusalem – and which is also the Cosmos - and the Tree is also the Cross – the point of intersection of heaven and earth, time and place, God and Creation.

Bonaventure tells the story as a series of twelve meditations, twelve fruit, each in four short sections.

As with everything in his work the Cross becomes the centre of the story – and of the whole of Creation.

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The structure of the book is very important. We need to see it as a whole, as the plan of a great cathedral – and also as a diagram of the entire cosmos. The meditations embrace every aspect of Creation – of life – and the Soul – which, as we know from The Soul's Journey, is a microcosm – the cosmos in miniature.

Though there are twelve sets of meditations I am not thinking about the zodiac as the structure of the book but the planetary heavens. If we see the central four sections, the passion, as one that stands in the place of the sun – the other planetary qualities find their place.

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In a cathedral the central point is the rood – the crucifixion – the meeting point of the earthly and the spiritual.

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This also happens to match the well-known form of the cabalistic tree – this shows the qualities of God in relationship – from the earthly below to the Source of All Being at the height. This Tree diagram did not actually appear in the form we know it until two centuries after Bonaventure – but this is not simply a coincidence as these aspects of God also reflect the cosmos. The sun is at the centre here...not the centre of the universe, of course, but the central point in the ascent from the material world to God.

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This is the form of Bonaventure's Tree of Life arranged in the form of the cabalistic Tree – with the Passion at the centre (with four divisions) – and the river flowing through from heaven to earth. I woke up one morning with this image in my mind and a friend painted it for me.

None of this is fanciful. Bonaventure's Tree, the cathedral and the cabalistic Tree are all images of the same cosmos – and are aspects of a common tradition.

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Bonaventure's book was illustrated by designs like this one from the British Library – which summarises all the meditations.

This is the key to the Tree of Life –

The core structure is universal – the pattern of the whole Creation and of the soul. Bonaventure's meditations use the gospel narrative to allow us to enter into and meditate on the archetypal world within us and everything through imagination.

BUT - We are NOT ascending through the cosmos to God – we are discovering the Incarnate God in ourselves – and our world. We are attuning ourselves to God and the cosmos.

<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/illmanus/harlmanucoll/b/011hrI000005234u00005000.html>

(Durham, c 1300)

Bonaventure invites us to place ourselves in the scenes in Imagination – to use our senses and feelings.

There is a complex Aristotelian philosophy behind this that justifies the belief that this use of imagination is real experience. We really are sharing the story.

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This use of Imagination has been studied by Michelle Karnes in *Imagination, Meditation and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, University of Chicago Press, 2011.

This is mysterious and powerful. Egil Asprem, a specialist in the history of magic, has suggested, following Karnes' work, that later traditions of imaginative magic have their origins in Bonaventure and Franciscan meditation.

(<https://heterodoxology.com/2016/02/24/the-scholastic-imagination/>)

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We know from *The Soul's Journey* that everything we bring into our imagination is a sign of God - everything communicates God –
– and our souls are also microcosms of the Cosmos - but in Christian terms God, as Christ, is present in us. Everyone.

Imagination is, therefore, also drawing on Memory – the anamnesis (or remembrance) of truths embedded in us.

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The Tree of Life is also a Memory Palace – an imagined place that was used in medieval memory technique – or a Memory cathedral – decorated with images of the sacred stories.

This imaginative meditation is a *real* experience - a form of direct experience of God.

Such spiritual exercises soon became suspect, and the Church discouraged such things – until Ignatius of Loyola revived imaginative exercises in the 16th century – but he was expecting them to be used by the new order of Jesuits, not by lay people.

And in this case the story we are using is sacred in itself - it's the story of Gods relationship with creation and us - a story from scripture – which is sacred – and (if we wish) from historical reality - though if we bear in mind the cosmic structure of the Tree we can see that the "Truth" of the story has deeper roots than any historical or factual events.

To begin with I want to establish what seems to me to be a very important principle.

Our Reason (which is a gift of God and an attribute of God) might suggests to us that this story is not factually or "Literally" true.

When we read *The Tree of Life* we have to embrace this *story* as a whole - while never forgetting it's a story. (I'm grateful to Angela Voss, writing about the philosophy of Bernardo Kastrup, for defining this idea.)

It's all too easy to read such a story with an analytical mind, dismissing things that we don't believe to be true – in a literal sense. If we do this we will never be able to see the story as a

whole – and it might be that the smallest details that we edit out with our modern literal mind might be the most important things!

With the right story, or an appropriate sequence of music, or through a journey or pilgrimage we can be led through all the deepest chambers of our souls – cleaning and polishing the mirror of our soul - and find God in every facet and every depth.

The Tree of Life is the Christian story told in Christian images – but the form and meaning is universal.

When we remember that Christ is also the Word, which is God in everything, and that we have this cosmos within us we can appreciate Bonaventure's words:

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Christ teaches interiorly, so that no truth is known except through Him, not through speech as it is with us, but through inner enlightenment... He Himself, then, is intimate to every soul ...

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The first section of the Tree – the first four fruit – is

On The Mystery of His Origins

And the first Fruit (each fruit has in four short meditations) is

His Distinguished Origin.

Bonaventure remind us that this is a cosmic drama:

When you hear that Jesus is begotten of God, beware let some inadequate thought of the flesh appear before your mind's eye. Rather, with the vision of the dove and the eagle, believe simply and contemplate with penetrating gaze the following: From that Eternal Light which is at the same time measureless and most simple, most brilliant and most hidden, there emerges a coeternal, coequal and consubstantial splendour who is the power and wisdom of the Father. In him the father made all things from eternity... (P.126)

“At the beginning of the Creation of Nature” Humanity was placed in Paradise but driven out because they tasted the Forbidden Fruit. In the fulness of time God comes into the world:

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We imagine the Annunciation when the Virgin Mary “gave her consent” to the Angel Gabriel...

If you could feel in some way the quality and intensity of that fire sent from heaven, the refreshing coolness that accompanied it...

...if you could hear the virgin singing with joy..,

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And we go with her to visit Elizabeth, who is to give birth to John the Baptist...

If you could go with your Lady into the mountainous region... (p. 127)

We imagine a landscape – these might also be mountains from our own experience – and these mountains might have a special quality because they remind us of the sacred mountains of scripture. These landscapes can be personal – but those memories with which we clothe the imagination are always of aspects of Nature which are theophanies – because everything is – as we know from *The Soul's Journey into God*.

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Mary was of vast importance to Bonaventure and Francis. In Bonaventure's sermons in honour of Mary he weaves together all kinds of phrases from scripture which might be thought to allude to her in a way that might seem shocking to today's literalist ways of thinking – but to the 13th century mind all of scripture is prophetic and has many layers of meaning – as has everything in Nature – and Mary is the Mother of God – Theotokos. As far as this telling of the story is concerned Mary, as the vessel who has given human nature to God, also has a relationship with everything in Creation. In giving birth to Jesus she is allowing God to be born into the material world – into Nature. (It was her choice.). She is, in effect, mother of everything in this new Creation.

She is our way of knowing the relationship of Nature and God – and she in herself affirms Creation as theophany. She is the Queen of Images.

Bonaventure invites us to use all our senses in imagination – with startling intimacy:

Now, then, my soul, embrace that divine manger; press your lips upon and kiss the boy's feet. Then in your mind keep the shepherds' watch, marvel at the assembling hosts of angels, join in the heavenly melody, singing with your voice and heart: Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will.

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The Second Fruit is

The Humility of his Mode of Life

Jesus is born in Bethlehem - and we follow the star –

Do not turn away from the brilliance of that star in the east which guides you.

We become a companion of the holy kings...

...adore, confess and praise this humble God, lying in a manger...

And here we might be reminded that this affective use of imagination– and encouragement to participate in the story – has its origin in St Francis who set up the first nativity scene – with a real stable, manger and animals – at Greccio – and this became an inspiration for the use of visual imagery – not just the vivid artwork of Giotto and others at the Basilica at Assisi but all kinds of representations – including the extraordinary life-size reproductions of biblical scenes at the Sacro Monte at Varallo.

This emotional approach all seems rather extreme to the English character – but the visit of the Magi is the feast of the Theophany – this is the image of God being revealed on Earth.

The infant Jesus is taken to the temple...

Let love overcome your bashfulness, let affection dispel your fear.

Receive the infant in your arms...

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And we even dance...

Dance with the holy old man and sing with him

Now dismiss your servant, Lord

According to your word in Peace.

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The Third Fruit is

The Loftiness of His Power

We are present at Christ's baptism in the River Jordan – when – (here Bonaventure quotes Bede) – Christ could...

...confer regenerative power on water by contact with his most pure flesh. (p.133)

We are imagining the River Jordan – another prophetic natural feature – which might remind us of the rivers of Paradise – but at the same time we might be remembering the sacrament of baptism – more than what we commonly think of as a symbol – but a direct participation in the event – and the regenerative water...

Imagination and Memory are weaving very complex patterns...

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We experience Christ's temptation in the desert...

...search into the secrets of solitude with your loving teacher so that having become a companion of wild beasts you may become an imitator and sharer in the hidden silence. (p. 134)

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We are taken to the mountain of the Transfiguration – which mountain will you imagine for this alarming event? We contemplate the transfigured Christ – revealing that he is also God...

...when heavenly repose and ecstasy are given to the soul it will *hear the secret words which man is not permitted to speak.*

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The Fourth Fruit –

On the Plenitude of his Piety

...views Christ's love for his flock – and we are invited to...

Like the sinful woman anoint him with ointment and wash his feet with your tears...

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And the climax of the first part of the Tree is the Last Supper – the institution of the sacrament of the Eucharist - the sharing of bread and wine.

At this point the Imagination enters depths which are beyond words. It could be said that everything in this story – and everything Bonaventure wrote – is a commentary on the sacrament – which really is a Mystery in every sense. I would say that Christianity, as a religion, entirely flows from that mysterious ritual. It's probably best left beyond words. I am sure everything that has ever been said is a distraction. The actions – the liturgy – might be the keys to its meaning. It's a point outside time in which everything meets – because it is also the memory of the Passion –

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The central quartet of Fruit is -

On the Mystery of his Passion.

The central four books are the cross in the centre of the universe and of the soul.

His Confidence in Trials

His Patience in Maltreatment

His Constancy under Torture

Victory in the Conflict of Death

If we imagine the structure of the book as the ground plan of a church or cathedral this is the central point, the Rood and screen which divides the Nave from the choir - which is sometimes also the crossing – the centre of the cross or cruciform structure of the building.

The crucified Christ is at the centre of everything for Bonaventure – but, if you imagine the cathedral, you can see that to the west, the nave, is the world – where the first part of the story has taken place – human life, relationships – sometimes worldly life would enter such a cathedral. Eastward, beyond the rood, the choir, was a heavenly world, where the liturgy happens, where this world reflects the heavens – and at the eastern point the High Altar.

This Rood is the Centre...

This is very difficult for the literal and, I fear, increasingly narrow, 21st century mind to grasp, but Bonaventure is all about the Coincidence of Opposites.

Look – both the worldly world of the nave and the heavenly world of the choir are really here in one place – and really here at the same time. The cross binds them together.

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The crucifixion is a scene of both horror and joy.

This is Good Friday.

Opposites are true.

The fifth and sixth fruit are the trial and mockery of Jesus. At the end of the seventh Mary, Christ's mother, stands at the foot of the cross and Christ gives the Beloved Disciple into her care. "Woman, behold your son." - one of many examples of seeing and recognition in St John's gospel.

The climax of the Passion is the Eighth Fruit:

With a loud cry and tears (Heb 5:7), Jesus, God and man, in order to manifest his feeling of pity and to declare the power of his divinity, commends his spirit to the hands of his Father and expires. Then *the veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom and the earth quaked and the rocks were rent and the tombs were opened*, (Matt. 27:51-52). Then the centurion recognised he was truly God.
(p. 153)

Here's another moment of recognition – and a biblical paradox. It's the Roman Centurion who sees that this is God.

And you, redeemed man, consider who he is, how great he is, what kind of person he is who for you is hanging on the cross, whose death brings the dead to life, at whose passing heaven and earth mourn and hard rocks crack...
(p. 154)

This is happening in time – at a moment of history – but for us it's happening now –.

We are also here at this place and at this time. Yes, this is in the Imagination, but it is also real.

Here the Seraphic Doctor asks us to experience something alarming – and complex.

One of the soldiers pierces Christ's side with a spear. Both water and blood flow out...Christ is both the dead figure on the Cross and a fountain of living water...

Here the union of opposites becomes extreme...

...apply your mouth to draw water from the Savior's fountains for this is the river arising from the midst of paradise which divided into four branches and flowing into devout hearts, water and makes fertile the whole earth. (p. 155)

This isn't irony. In this image Bonaventure is asking us to enter a moment that is both horrible and wonderful. This is terrible and beautiful. But in our imagination this one point of darkness and horror is shattering into a kaleidoscope of coloured light. We are seeing through transparent images into transparent images. The world and time are unfolding and folding in on themselves.

This is blood and water from a wound but IT IS ALSO the "river arising from paradise".

If we meditate on this image where might it take us?

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Imagine the river, flowing from that garden where all Creation is living in Harmony. The river divides into four branches – imagine this garden – perhaps as the pattern of Islamic Paradise gardens – the river is flowing into the world on each side of us – we are in that garden. Now.

And we know, or Bonaventure would assume we know, that this is also the river running through and from the Holy City – the Heavenly, ideal, Jerusalem, – and which is also the ancient Temple – and the Holy of Holies - the pattern of the Cosmos – the world as it should be - but it's here and now – and (folds within folds, images within images, colours within colours) the Tree of Life grows by the river – with its twelve coloured fruit. And this book is the Tree, isn't it? These words and image are the fruit.

And the water flows into our hearts – its within us – and it “makes fertile the whole earth”. Now. It’s flowing through the whole earth. We are standing at the foot of the cross, like Mary the Virgin and Mary and Magdalen – we are (we really are) standing at the centre point of an imaginary cathedral – but look – the rivers are flowing from where we stand. The cathedral floor is a carpet of flowers. The stone columns are trees.

This gleaming forest with its fresh streams is Paradise – look, here are the fruit of the Tree of Life hanging around us – it’s the Holy City – and it’s here now.

The story this book is telling is happening in time – from the beginning of Creation to the end – but it’s also all here and now.

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When St Francis sang his Canticle of the Creatures, praising God with Brother Sun and Moon, the stars, the elements, he wasn’t simply being at one with nature in an ecological way, he was dancing in this rediscovered Eden - here and now.

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At the end of the Passion sequence Mary Magdalen waits by the tomb – which is in another garden – or another image of the same garden – just as the tomb is another image of the Holy of Holies in the Temple. (How often do people notice that the two angels in the tomb, in St John, reflect the two cherubim in the Holy of Holies?) Images within Images.

Bonaventure was probably aware that this book would be used by the Poor Clares, the order founded by Francis’s friend, Clare. Clare had wanted to follow Francis into the world, but the Church, and society, would not allow such a radical and possibly dangerous way of life, so Clare and her order had to become enclosed, contemplative – but always an inseparable part of the Franciscan movement. Perhaps the author is thinking of the Poor Clares in the last scene of the Passion sequence -

Then, after the Lord was buried and soldiers were assigned to guard the tomb, those devoted and holy women who had followed him when he was alive, in order to render him service out of their dutiful piety now he was dead, bought spices to anoint Jesus’ most sacred body. Among them Mary Magdalene was born along by such a burning in her heart, moved by such sweetness and of piety and drawn by such strong bonds of love that, forgetting her feminine weakness, she was held back from visiting the tomb neither by the darkness of the night nor the cruelty of the persecutors. Rather, she stood outside and bathed the tomb with her tears.

God, Heaven, the Cosmos, the world, Soul and Body are being brought together in this multi-dimensional image of the cross.

I am not considering the historical reality of the story here. I am not sure whether that is even possible to do, or meaningful. I believe that the story is a means of understanding something deeper – beyond the words and images. To read this story literally as a historical reality, losing sight of the infolding of symbolism, colour, time and space, is completely opposed to the nature of this complex reality.

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The third quartet of Fruit...

On the Mystery of His Glorification

...takes us beyond this world – and yet we are also participating in this – the New Jerusalem is somehow present in us...

The Novelty of his Resurrection

The Sublimity of his Ascension

The Equity of his Judgment

The Eternity of his Kingdom

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At the climax of *the Tree of Life* all Creation and Scripture is seen as one book – but even more than that -

Oh, if only I could find this book whose origin is eternal, whose essence is incorruptible, whose knowledge is life, whose script is indelible, whose study is desirable, whose teaching is easy, whose knowledge is sweet, whose depth is inscrutable, whose words are ineffable, yet all are a single Word.

(Bonaventure, *The Tree of Life*, op. cit.)

This book is everything. Creation is part of scripture. Everything that exists is an expression of that one Word, that love flowing from God, through the Tree of Life.

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We are led back to the point of Unity – through which everything flows from the Source of All Being - which we glimpsed in *The Soul's Journey into God*.

Perhaps, if we are able to cleanse the mirrors of our own souls through this exercise of imagination, we might be able to see that truth beyond the Cloud of Unknowing more clearly – and then return to this world, seeing it in a new light – radiant with Unity.

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Bonaventure's *Life of St Francis* was written as a standard form of biography at a time when many confusing and fantastic stories were circulating. Like the *Soul's Journey* and *Tree of Life* the *Life of St Francis* is carefully structured. Bonaventure tells the story as an example of a life that follows the mystical path through purgation and illumination towards Unity with God – to the vision of the seraph which opened *The Soul's Journey* – and Francis's unity with Christ, revealed in his stigmata.

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To Bonaventure the whole of Creation is part of scripture. Everything reveals God in many ways. Everything is a book.

In his last work, *Hexaemeron*, Bonaventure spoke about how we can read this book – how we can read the world.

The Franciscans had a practice of reading which they called “lectio spiritualis” (spiritual reading) rather than the “lectio divina” of the Benedictions. Importance is given to the awareness of our feelings. Ideally reading is something we do in community. Listening together – whether of scripture of Creation. It's a different experience.

There are four kinds of Wisdom which we learn through this reading – and all are that one Word.

Uniform Wisdom – this is the wisdom that is unchanging, the law of God embedded in all things.

Multiform Wisdom – this is what we read in scripture- which has many meanings. We can read what the words say (which is not the same as taking it literally!), we can read them symbolically, as hidden signs of Christ, in many ways. And every reading is different.

This (multiform) wisdom results from many mysteries of Scripture, just as many mirrors produce a multiplication of rays of light and fires.

(Bonaventure, *Collations on the Hexaemeron*, Franciscan Institute, 2018, p101)

Omniform Wisdom – is the wisdom from reading all Creation as scripture – in these many ways.

Nulliform Wisdom – is the pure wisdom we learn from God when all else falls away.

This is a very long way from the modern tendency to take things literally. Literal meaning is only one small facet of the infinitely varied ways in which God communicates through Creation – which is all scripture.

Reading the World is really more like listening to music, in which we bring our own feelings and memories into the performance and everyone hears a different facet of the work.

God is communicating through Nature – but it may surprise us to read that at the start of his last work, *the Collations on the Six days of Creation*, Bonaventure warns his readers that “being in love with the beauty of nature” leads to death.

(Bonaventure: *Collations on the Hexaemeron: Conferences on the Six Days of Creation: The Illuminations of the Church* (Works of St. Bonaventure Book 18), Franciscan Institute, 2018, 1:17)

Love means many things. Bonaventure loves Paradox. Of course, we love Creation – and Francis loved Creation - but this is not “being in love with Creation” but sharing in Love with Creation - sharing a Love which is actually the outpouring of God – which is living in God.

Neither Francis nor Bonaventure are concerned with the love of Nature in itself– for both, everything is focused on Christ Crucified. For someone who is at one with God - who is Christ-like, the world is revealed as a new Eden, or perhaps it’s better to say Creation has become the Kingdom of Heaven on earth - everything in Creation will be a brother or sister.

When Bonaventure wrote this warning he was particularly concerned with the temptation to look at Nature as an object, intellectually or scientifically. The early Franciscans included early scientists, like Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon. Scientific knowledge, all true knowledge, must also lead to God - but we must not forget that Nature is an icon and not an idol. It is not merely an object to analyse.

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Bonaventure died on 15th July 1274 just after he had brought about a brief reconciliation between the eastern and western churches at the Council of Lyon. Some say he was poisoned. The churches split apart again, never to be re-united.

Bonaventure’s fears were justified. Theology in the west became dominated by the influence of the Arabic commentaries on Aristotle. God became “the unmoved mover” – as if God could not have any direct connection with Creation. It was even possible to think of God as being beyond reason – God might do things which were not reasonable to a human

way of thinking – which inevitably leads to people doing unreasonable things and believing they are doing God's work.

To Thomas Aquinas Knowledge was beyond Love. God was detached increasingly from Creation. Religion began to lose interest in Creation, focusing on sin and personal salvation – and the world to come.

The scientific discoveries of the 16th and 17th centuries demonstrated that the universe was not physically as it had been imagined – the old image of the Cosmos was dismissed – but did the Christian story of incarnation and redemption really make sense on one small planet amongst millions? How do we understand this cosmic story in terms of the new universe?

And more recently the literal mind has looked for historical realities behind the biblical narrative – discovering that what in the 13th century could be read as inspired and literal no longer be - but often looking for evidence that supports a particular point of view.

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...and yet – the old image was a true image – not a literal picture of a material universe but an image of a Cosmos with a Unity and with laws of Harmony within it. Harmony is still true – and the ancient Images – Tree, Temple, Garden, River – are still true if we read them right...

But we are now in a position where we can understand that the story – and the liturgy of religion – conveys meaning which is deeper than any words and images – and we can embrace the world of Imagination that allows us to enter into it. We can read Bonaventure's *Tree of Life* as a story – and experience it as system of meditation – while knowing that it is a story.

This might be very difficult for people with a literal mind.

I see both *The Soul's Journey* and *the Tree of Life* as explorations of a common wisdom. They are ways of mapping reality – from earth to heaven. I have suggested that these books share a common wisdom with Platonic and Jewish tradition.

I am not aware of an imaginative system of Christian meditations before Bonaventure- and yet the use of mystical imagination was developing in Islam during the same period. This was a time when there were close connections between the three religions in Europe – especially Spain – some see signs of a Sufi influence on St Francis – at one point there were

Saracen soldiers in Assisi, serving the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II who was at war with the Pope.

I can't say whether it's a matter of historical fact or not but I have heard a very convincing case that St Francis's meditation on the Praises of God is modelled on a Sufi prayer – intended to be sung as a repetitive contemplation. It certainly works.

All these traditions are about the same cosmos – the same sacred universe. They can only be several varying human points of view of one sacred reality.

Christianity in the west, after Bonaventure, followed the (Pseudo-) Aristotelian path – eventually splitting into many branches – and the tension between the new (Pseudo-) Aristotelian philosophy and the old symbolic Platonic approach affected Christianity, Judaism and Islam, encouraging a literalism – and a fundamentalism – which is far removed from the religious vision of the 13th century.

Losing the sense of a symbolic cosmos in which we share is a disaster with dire consequences for the whole world.

Joseph Milne wrote:

SLIDE 36

If the cosmos is seen as essentially holy, and therefore as revelatory, as the religions and poets have always seen it, then it is possible for the human soul to participate consciously in the providential destiny of the cosmic narrative. But if the cosmos is seen as an indifferent mechanism blindly hurtling to its eventual extinction, then human nature will be seen likewise.

(Joseph Milne in *The Imaginal Cosmos*, edited by Angela Voss and Jean Hinson Lall, The University of Kent, 2004.)

SLIDE 37

If we are to rediscover the world of Francis and Bonaventure we have to forget everything we think we know. The same words might mean very different things. The God of more recent centuries is a very different God. I remember Joseph Milne, who has written some wonderful things about the period, saying of the 13th century “This was when they invented the God atheists don't believe in.” He meant the kind of God who controls everything – including wars and pandemics – and decides in advance who is to be saved – very different from the God of outpouring love and a free Creation.

We are living in a very different universe in which much of the old tradition has lost its meaning.

This cosmic story is distorted if we forget the cosmos in which it takes place.

How can we rediscover the true meaning of the story when we “know” that the old cosmos of heavenly spheres isn't “real”?

But it IS! Harmony is still Harmony. We know that there are inherent laws that guide the universe. We know that we cannot separate what seems to be material from what seems to be spiritual.

We can – perhaps – save the appearances of this old story if we read it in this way – embracing it as true while never forgetting it is a story.

If we can escape the temptation to be literal – if we can embrace the stories - perhaps this last flowering of Christian-Platonism in the life of Francis and the words of Bonaventure - can help us not only understand the world but inspire us to imagine it, relate to it in every part of our humanity – and to learn again to hear its music – and join the dance.

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