

Night Prayer

3rd Sunday of Easter
18th April 2021

In the garden: the trees

Introduction

Last Sunday we considered the role of Jesus as gardener. We are staying with the garden theme but this time moving to trees.

Apart from human beings, trees are the most frequently mentioned living thing in the Bible. They appear in the first chapter of Genesis:

11 Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so.

and in the last chapter of Revelation:

22¹ Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

Trees play an important role within many religions: being seen as symbols of growth, death and rebirth, and evergreen trees also seen as suggesting eternity and fertility. Trees link heaven, the earth and the underworld.



Opening Prayer

Creator God,
Out of chaos you brought order.
Out of nothingness you brought life.
In the middle of all life stands the tree.

Trees provide the air that nurtures all your creation.
Birds make them their homes.
Cats climb them for protection.
Trees recycle life that has come before.

Bless the trees of this word, loving God.
Remind us to serve as their caregivers and protectors.
Give them long limbs and long life.
The gift of their breath is as special to us as the breath of the Holy Spirit.
(Rev'd Chuck Currie United Church of Christ)

Reading

'I Thank you God for this Amazing Day' by e e cummings. It is being read against the background of 'The Lark Ascending' by Vaughan Williams.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HQ4vIYMqkLo>

I thank You God for most this amazing day
For the leaping greenly spirits of trees
And a blue true dream of sky
And for everything which is natural, which is infinite, which is yes

I who have died am alive again today
And this is the sun's birthday
This is the birth day of life and of love and wings
And of the gay great happening illimitably earth

How should tasting, touching, hearing, seeing, breathing any
Lifted from the no of all nothing
Human merely being doubt unimaginable You?

Now the ears of my ears awake
And now the eyes of my eyes are opened

This Evening's Music

Jesus Christ the Apple Tree – this song is often associated with Christmas repertoires, but works well at any time of the year. This version is sung by Jane Siberry. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYKYHb9LkSU>

Reading Psalm 104: 12-18

He makes springs pour water into the ravines;
it flows between the mountains.
¹¹ They give water to all the beasts of the field;
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.
¹² The birds of the sky nest by the waters;
they sing among the branches.
¹³ He waters the mountains from his upper chambers;
the land is satisfied by the fruit of his work.
¹⁴ He makes grass grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to cultivate—
bringing forth food from the earth:
¹⁵ wine that gladdens human hearts,
oil to make their faces shine,
and bread that sustains their hearts.
¹⁶ The trees of the Lord are well watered,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
¹⁷ There the birds make their nests;
the stork has its home in the junipers.



A Cedar of Lebanon

Reflection

Although I said that the Bible mentions trees more often than other living things apart from humans, this actually depends on what you mean by living. The Bible tends to consider trees along with other plants as non-sentient and hence non-living. This reflects the sequence in Genesis 1 of the creation of plants and trees on the third day before birds and fish (day five) and animals then finally humans on day six. When Noah is asked to take a pair of all living things onto the ark, there are no plants or trees included. (However, as the first proof that they could leave the ark was the dove returning with an olive leaf, we have to assume that the plants survived!).

The ancient philosophers tended to think the same way. Aristotle ranked plants below humans and animals, and this was unchallenged by early Christian thinkers. This meant that humans could avoid any moral dilemmas concerning how plants or trees were utilised. So Christianity doesn't start with many green credentials!

Trees were important both individually and collectively across almost all religions. In Genesis 12 we read:

So Abram departed from Haran..... and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

So here we see Abram is willing to associate a key promise from God by erecting an altar next to a tree which almost certainly had religious significance for the Canaanite people, so seems not to be dissociating himself from it. Only a few chapters on we meet Abram, now Abraham, again at the oaks of Mamre, where is greeted by three visitors whom he feeds and one of whom promises that Sarah will bear Abraham a son. Again this key event is associated without any problems with a local sacred site.

Move on many years to the Children of Israel leaving Egypt, and eventually entering Canaan again, to claim 'their' land. Although the Bible seeks to give the impression that the worship of their one God was firmly established, the reality was probably different. To try to preserve their own monotheistic religion amongst many other competing gods probably explains why they are strictly told to remove any local sacred places. This seems quite a contrast from the way Abraham operated earlier. However, the stories of the various kings of Judah and Israel (in Kings and Chronicles) show that this proves extremely difficult. There is persistent worship by the Israelites at places associated with other gods. This was probably exacerbated by having only one official building for worship – the Temple, built by King Solomon in Jerusalem.

With the rise and spread of Christianity, missionaries were seen coming into contact with sacred trees or woods of other beliefs. The more zealous you were to proclaim the purity of the Christian message, the more likely you were to want to cut down 'pagan' trees, which tended to create more conflict with the locals than engage them with Christianity. Others were more accommodating, associating pagan sites with Christian saints, or even including a tree within the churchyard. At Glastonbury, Christians even got a tree of their own – the Glastonbury Thorn said to have sprung from the staff of Joseph of Aramathea.

It is really only in the late twentieth century that the Christian Church has started to take ecology and sustainability seriously, and started to see the preservation of trees and the planting of new ones as part of Christian responsibility to creation and the planet.

So perhaps it's time to go outside, and hug a tree, or at least consider this invitation from Richard Rohr.

He begins with a short poem by Rabindranath Tagore (1867 -1941, a Bengali poet who was the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.)

*Silence my soul, these trees are prayers.
I asked the tree, "Tell me about God";
then it blossomed.*

Richard Rohr says: "Now look around you, wherever you are, and find something of beauty. Sit in spacious silence, observing without words or judgment. Let this beauty teach you the mystery of Incarnation, of God's indwelling presence in all creation."

Confession... (The words of a native American Indian)

The Sheltering Tree

Hey! Learn to hear my feeble voice.
At the centre of the sacred hoop
You have said that I should make the tree to bloom.

With tears running, O Great Spirit, my Grandfather,
With running eyes I must say
The tree has never bloomed

Here I stand, and the tree is withered.
Again, I recall the great vision you gave me.

It may be that some little root of the sacred tree still lives.
Nourish it then
That it may leaf
And bloom
And fill with singing birds!

Hear me, that the people may once again
Find the good road
And the shielding tree.

(Black Elk)

Intercessions

O Lord, grant us the grace to grow deeper in our respect of
And care for your Creation.
Lord, hear our prayer.

O Lord, help us to recognize the sacredness of all of your
Creatures as signs of your wondrous love.
Lord, hear our prayer.

O Lord, help us turn from the selfish consumption of
Resources meant for all and to see the impacts of our
choices on the poor and vulnerable.
Lord, hear our prayer.
(Xavier University)



This Bristlecone Pine in California is almost 5,000 years old

The Prayer of the Trees

I am the heat of your hearth on the cold winter nights,
the friendly shade screening you from the summer sun,
and my fruits are refreshing draughts quenching your thirst as you journey on.
I am the beam that holds your house, the board of your table,
the bed on which you lie, and the timber that builds your boat.
I am the handle of your hoe, the door of your homestead,
the wood of your cradle, and the shell of your coffin.
I am the bread of kindness and the flower of beauty.
Ye who pass by, listen to my prayer: Harm me not.

(This was written in 1914 by the Portuguese writer Alberto de Veiga Simões. He worked as a diplomat for Portugal during the first and second world wars, and played a key role in helping persecuted minorities escape from the Nazis while stationed in Berlin in the 1940s.)

Blessing

The love of the faithful Creator
The peace of the wounded Healer
The joy of the challenging Spirit
The hope of the three in One
Surround and encourage you
Today, tonight and for ever.

(Kathy Galloway)

Closing Music

'Songs from the Shade of the Cashew and Coconut Trees'

This is a short video with music from the Caribbean and West Africa. Its in native languages, but it's not about the words. Just something to enjoy.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0x8zsCz14g>

