

REFLECTIONS FOR THE SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 13 February 2022

The Mount ~ The Residence at Litledale

“Ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you” (Job 12:8). We are becoming more and more aware that God speaks to us through two books: the little book of Scripture and the big book of creation – the written sacred text and the living sacred text. Once again in our readings in the Liturgy of the Word this morning, these two books come together to teach us.



The plants of Earth which teach us today are trees. Trees are among the oldest living things on earth, in existence for 370 million years. It is estimated that there are some three trillion mature trees in the world today although they are being destroyed at an alarming rate. As far as we know, the oldest tree now living in a ristlecone pine, estimated to be 5,076 years old. So, there are trees alive today that were already ancient in the time of Jesus.

Trees play a significant role in reducing erosion and moderating the climate. They remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and store large quantities of carbon in their tissues. Trees and forests provide a habitat for many species of animals and plants with tropical rainforests among the most biodiverse habitats in the world. Trees provide shade and shelter, timber for construction, fuel for cooking and heating, and fruit for food. They renew our spirits simply by letting us walk among them or climb them!

One of my favourite books was given me by my nephew Alan. Entitled *The Hidden Life of Trees* and written by forester Peter Wohlleben, it makes the case that the forest is a social network. The author draws on groundbreaking scientific discoveries to describe how trees are like human families: tree parents live together with their children, communicate with them, support them as they grow, share nutrients with those who are sick or struggling, and even warn each other of impending dangers. The studies reveal the amazing symbioses trees have with fungi, microbes, and other species. Most of these relationships occur under the living soil, while more happen on the surface of the trees and leaves. In the words of the ecologist Mark Ditmanson, “The intricate enmeshing of life forms reveals that all earthlings need each other, and that God obviously brought all this into a shared pattern of being. Living together, seeking harmony, and finding mutual benefit are the truths these epiphanies in forests reveal.”



Trees have always been revered, with sacred groves in various cultures. Trees are mentioned in the Bible more than any living thing other than God and people. From the first chapters of Genesis

to the book of Psalms (beginning with today's Psalm 1) and to the last chapters of Revelation, trees reveal God to us and reveal us to each other and ourselves. The diversity is apparent with more than thirty named trees, including Acacia (Ex 25: 5), Sandalwood (2 Chron 2:8), Almond (Gen 30:37), Appletree (Sg of Sgs 2:3), Mulberry (2 Sam 5:23), Broom (1 Kgs 19: 4), Cedar (1 Kgs 4:33), Cypress (2 Kgs 19:23), Ebony (Ezek 27:15), Fig (Matt 21:19), Myrtle (Neh 8:15), Walnut (Sg of Sgs 6:11), Oak (Gene 35:8), Olive (Jdgs 9:8), Palm tree (Ex 15:27), Platane (Gen 30:37), Poplar (Gen 30:37), Sycamore (Lk 19:4), Tamarisk (Gen 21:33), Willow (Ezek 17:5), and Vine (Ps 107:37).



Oak at Mamre

In the Bible, trees designate meeting places: Elijah in his despair is under the juniper tree where he is nourished in body and spirit by the angel (1 Kgs 19:5-8), Zacchaeus meets Jesus under the sycamore tree and is forever changed (Luke 19: 1-10), Jesus sees Nathaniel under the fig tree and calls him to become a disciple (Jn 1:46-50). Trees are places of revelation to a person:

Abraham and Sarah encounter three mysterious travelers under the oak of Mamre where they are both told by God that they will have a son (Gen 18:1-15), at the

burning bush Moses meets God, learns God's name, and is called to lead the people from Egypt (Ex 3:1-21), and Deborah carried out her role as judge in Israel under the palm tree (Jgs 4:1-5). Jesus points to the mustard tree as the image of the kingdom of God (Matt 13:31-32).

One of the more persistent images of the tree is its fruit-bearing. In our first reading today from Jeremiah we read, "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit" (Jer 7-8). This is echoed in Psalm 1, "Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on God's law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither" (Ps 1:2-3). For many of us who today suffer pain, illness, less acute memory, or challenges in walking, we feel that we no longer can be in active ministry as we once were. The trees teach us that we bear fruit in season – that fruit changes as the seasons change, but the fruit is no less rich and plentiful.



The lovely passage from 1 Corinthians reminds us about the key truth of our faith, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died" (1 Cor 15:20). We echo this truth every time we say the Apostles Creed, the oldest statement of our faith outside the Scriptures, "I believe in . . . the resurrection of the body and life everlasting." Our material being,

our earthiness, is Christ's material being and Christ's earthiness and, in his resurrection, becomes the first fruits of all of us who will be raised in our earthly being.

Luke's Gospel reminds us of the fruits we yield in their season. Jesus teaches the beatitudes but with two major differences from the teaching on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. The writer of Luke's Gospel tells us very definitely that the teaching happens on "a level place" not on the Mountain. Everyone – Jesus, the disciples, the people from all the regions – is on the level place. All see each other eye to eye! And, unlike Matthew's Gospel, Luke's version gives both the blessings and the woes. For most of us, the woes are indeed woes since they speak about those who are rich, full, laughing and spoken about positively. That describes most of us in our lives.

There are two lessons for us. The first lesson, taught by the trees in Jeremiah and Psalm 1 is that, if we have everything we want, it is difficult to know our vulnerability before God – we begin to believe that we deserve everything that we have received, that we have earned it by working hard and living a good life. The second lesson is how we respond from our place of privilege – whether we reach out to those who are poor, hungry, weeping, excluded, or reviled. This begins with the people with whom we live every day – do we reach out to them in their sadness or loneliness or need? It reaches out to our support for The Gathering Place or St. Patrick's mercy Home or St. Clare's Mercy Hospital or our ministry in Puerto Eten or Huarmey. It reaches out to our care for our common home in how we act as good stewards in our own places or in our efforts to bring about better care for Earth beyond our own places.

On Tuesday, we will celebrate Valentine's Day, one day during the year when we are encouraged to reflect on and be grateful for love in our lives. The philosopher, Kahlil Gibran, reminds us, "When you love you should not say, 'God is in my heart,' but rather, 'I am in the heart of God.'" The Presbyterian pastor, [Thom Shuman](#), brings today's themes together within the heart of God:

God of our wonder, Heart of creation:
we are blessed when we feast on your Word:
 that Word which embraces us;
 that Word which teaches us;
 that Word which transfigures us;
 that Word which grounds us.
Give us your Word this, and every, day.

Jesus Christ, Heart of God's children:
we are blessed when we have your compassion:
 that heart for the poor;
 for the hungry;
 for those who weep;
 for those left out.
Give us your heart this, and every, day.

Holy Delight, Grace's Heartbeat:
we bear fruit when we overflow with your spirit:
 that spirit of generosity;
 that spirit of pouring ourselves out in service;
 that spirit of bearing another's burden.
Give us your spirit this, and every, day.



God in Community, Holy in One,
may our hearts beat as one with your heart.

Tomorrow, on Valentine's Day, take time to reflect with a tree that is special to you – one of the trees where you live, a tree from your memory of your childhood home, a tree from a place where you minister or ministered, a tree from the scriptures or a book which is precious to you. Listen to the tree – hear God speak to you in this meeting place, this place of revelation as you ask the tree of Earth to teach you.



Mosaic: Tree of Life