

Readings for Sunday 17 September 2017 Pentecost 15 Forest Sunday

Introduction

Our readings today remind us of several ways in which we find trees at the heart of faith journey as we walk the Jesus Way in the twenty first century.

We've all heard the conventional interpretation of the second creation story in **Genesis 2**. This pictures a man being created first and the prohibition being set in place for this man. He should not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as this would cause death.

The Hebrew which is often translated Adam as if it were a first name for a male person or as 'he' is actually *ha-'adamah* or earth creature. This creature at this stage is not sexually differentiated but a generic human. It is not until later in Genesis that two persons of different gender are created in a single act.

Later scholars have also argued that the apparent sentence of death is merely the recognition of mortality. Or, in another interpretation, that what will die is not the nascent earth creature but innocence. Once the fruit is eaten, as we know, like the divine being knows, what is good but also what is evil, we human beings are then no longer child like. We are no longer innocent but conscious of who and what we are and of what good and evil we are truly capable. This sets us on a path which will cause us both pain and which will require of us hard toil. The pain of childbirth and the sweat of the brow are not punishments but consequences of no longer being in an unconscious, innocent, paradise.

The tree of life also mentioned here as one of the plants in the Garden is an important symbol. It appears in many other stories with a spiritual meaning, not only stories of Jewish or Christian origin, suggesting it is an archetypal symbol. As one author says, since the Bible begins with the Tree of Life in Genesis and ends with the Tree of Life in Revelations, "We live our life between the trees"

Psalms 29 which Sandra will read to us is what we might have written in the last week or two as first Hurricane Harvey, the Irma, then Jose then Katia bore down on the Caribbean or as the monsoon deluge was felt in Asia, were we living thousands of years before this Common Era. A cedar of Lebanon is a great and mighty tree. The storm which the author, perhaps David, must have seen to inspire this psalm must have been hurricane-like in its intensity. Or perhaps he dreamed of such a storm. In the thinking of the time only the gods could cause such destruction.

The awe with which we watched our TV screens last week, is here in the psalmist's words – the oaks are twisted, the forest laid bare. Compare this psalm, this prehistoric press release, to the multiple maps and radar images we saw in the last 2-3 weeks, the pictures from the space station, the TV commentary – the cause of this psalm and the cause of those weather maps was the same - a mighty and terrifying storm. Which is the least terrifying? To believe it is God doing this, or that the actions of many humans

beings have warmed the earth to a stage when its climate has become so unstable? Is either possibility under our control?

In our brief ***Gospel reading***, out of a set of parables about the kingdom of God, Jesus speaks of mustard – the tiniest of seeds – yet which when planted in the ground, grows into a bush big enough to shelter birds. Here we see Jesus using exaggeration as a teaching tool. This is not the simple mustard plant we might use in a garden to refresh the soil or grow as a crop in the field. The small seed of *black* mustard does grow into a larger plant than the yellow mustard we know. It would, however, not grow big enough to shelter birds. The point is thereby made by hyperbole, Jesus' audience would have been caught by the inconsistencies in Jesus' botany here. They would pay more attention, thus learning that faith which is as small as a mustard seed, can grow to larger things. When it has, maybe some, like the birds in the story will shelter in it, maybe others will attempt to pull it out of the ground as a noxious weed it can be.

The question for us now is what will we do with the faith and trust which is small within us – will we tend it and help it grow? And also, who needs its branches so they can land and find a foothold on this mustard version of the tree of life?

Hebrew Bible Genesis 2:8-9 and 15-17.

8 Now God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there placed the earth creature which had been formed. 9 All kinds of trees were made to grow out of the ground — trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

15 God took the earth creature, placing it in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. 16 And the earth creature was commanded, You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.

Psalms 29 A psalm of David.

1 Ascribe to God, you heavenly beings, ascribe glory and strength.
3 The voice of God is over the waters; ...thunders over the mighty waters.
4 The voice of God is powerful; it is majestic.
5 The voice of God breaks the cedars; breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.
6 makes Lebanon leap like a calf, Sirion like a young wild ox.
7 The voice of God strikes with flashes of lightning.
8 The voice of God shakes the desert; shakes the Desert of Kadesh.
9 The voice of God twists the oaks and strips the forests bare
And in the temple all cry, Glory!
10 God sits enthroned over the flood; enthroned as Ruler forever.
11 Strength is given to the people, and they are blessed with peace.

Gospel The Parable of the Mustard Seed Luke 13:18,19.

18 Then Jesus asked, What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? 19 It is like a mustard seed, which a person took and planted in the garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches.