

THE TREE OF LIFE AND THE LIFE OF TREES

SERMON

*Readings: This sermon is mainly based on **Genesis 2:8-17**. If other readings are needed, it is suggested that **Revelation 22:1-5** is used as a New Testament reading, and if a Gospel reading is required, then **Luke 13:18-21** (the Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast).*

There is a PowerPoint presentation with slides to accompany this sermon, although it is not essential. There are notes during the sermon to indicate where to change slides.

Reading from Genesis 2:8-17

⁸ Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. ⁹ The Lord God made all kinds of trees 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. ¹⁰ A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. ¹¹ The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. ¹² (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) ¹³ The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. ¹⁴ The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. ¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, "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."

Introduction

[SLIDE 1]

I want to begin with a question: What does life depend on?

[SLIDE 2]

Putting it differently: what is most vital for the survival of human life on planet earth? Of course the 'right answer' (and if we were all a Sunday School class of children we'd already be straining our arms and whispering it loudly) is 'God'. And our Sunday School selves would be quite right: God is the fount of all being, the source of our life, the creator, the sustainer, the One on whom all things depend. But let's put the question another way: How has God set up life on planet earth? If we primarily depend on God, what do we depend on in a secondary sense? What are God's chosen means - physical, chemical and biological means - by which life succeeds or fails?

That's a more complex question. [*Depending on how informal your church is, it might be good to get people to talk to their neighbours for a couple of minutes and then shout answers out.*] The obvious answers are things like food, water, soil, fuel, and air to breathe



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(and a liveable atmosphere to regulate temperature and provide fresh air). Without these, life cannot exist. They are – or at least should be - daily reminders to us that we cannot live our lives independently – we are created to be dependent within the community of creation – within our global ecosystem.

Why trees?

Today we are going to focus on ‘trees’.

[SLIDE 3]

Trees may seem a surprising topic for a service, but actually the Bible has plenty to say about trees, from its very first chapter to its last one, and we’ll only have time to touch on a little of what the Bible says. But trees are also important because they are at the heart of our interdependence. So many of life’s vital ingredients: clean air; fresh water; nourishing food; fuel for warmth are all totally dependent on trees.

[SLIDE 4]

Listen to what Dr. Martin Kaonga, Director of Science & Conservation for Christian conservation charity, A Rocha International, has to say about trees:

[Where possible, play video clip. Where this is not possible, read out the following paragraph and ideally display it on a screen too.]

[SLIDE 5]

Trees are an invaluable part of our world. In fact there would be no life on earth without trees and other plants. They produce oxygen for us and other animals to use, and they absorb the carbon dioxide we breathe out! Trees also provide habitat and food for countless animals, and food and medicines for people. Forests are the nurseries of life – they contain more species per hectare than any other kind of land-based habitat.

[SLIDE 6]

That’s why we need to protect them, and why the work of A Rocha’s tropical forests programme is so important. Around the world we are working with Christian communities who live in or near to, and depend on forests, from Peru and Brazil, to Kenya and Ghana, across to India. The people who live around these forests are – with us – trustees of these wonderful parts of God’s creation.

[SLIDE 7]

Working with local Christian communities we can help prevent deforestation, and learn more of God’s purposes and God’s handiwork. Trees also have an important place in the Bible! They are signs of life and God’s provision—from the trees in the Garden to



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Eden to the Tree of Life in the New Jerusalem. Wherever we live, we have trees as our neighbours, and we can help care for them, study their ecology, and take part in tree-planting.

Let's turn to the Bible. In Genesis 2 verse 9, God places the first human being in a garden and we read:

[SLIDE 8]

“The Lord God made all kinds of trees 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.” There are several things we can take from this:

Trees are good for us

Firstly, a garden full of trees was the starting point for human life – trees that would meet our needs – they were ‘good for food’ – and also trees that would lift our spirits and inspire our creativity – they were ‘pleasing to the eye’. We were created to be surrounded by trees. Think of cities you know, and how parks, gardens and areas with trees raise people’s spirits, as well as keeping the city cooler and the air cleaner. We know that this planet’s land surfaces were once largely covered in trees and forests.

[SLIDE 9]

Over time we have destroyed most of those forests, and deforestation still continues. According to the WWF (Worldwide Fund for Nature) the world has lost half its forests, and only a tenth of what remains is protected. Each year, we lose another 130,000 km² – an area the size of England or Greece – larger than countries like Cuba, Malawi or North Korea. As we do so, we lose areas that are good for food and also pleasing to the eye – important for well-being.

[SLIDE 10]

So, that’s our first point: trees are good for us. God made us to live in a tree-filled environment, and we thrive physically, mentally and in fact spiritually when we have trees around us.

Trees aren’t just for us

Secondly, the Bible is clear that all of this wasn’t created just for us - for human beings. In Genesis 1, plants and trees are made both for people and also for “the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground”.

[SLIDE 11]

God has made this earth as a system of abundance and of interdependence. As we destroy forests around the world, we destroy the habitats of many of our God-created fellow creatures. Forests are not only amongst the most biodiverse ecosystems that exist, they also



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consist of species that are fine-tuned to their habitats. When the forests have gone, Orangutans and Amazonian Parrots have nowhere else to go, and neither do the many millions of smaller, less photogenic but equally important species – frogs, orchids, insects, fungi and so on. As Martin Kaonga says, these creatures and their habitats need protecting not only because our well-being is ultimately tied to theirs - we are destroying the systems on which life depends - but also because they matter to God. He created this world for them as well as for us, and, according to Genesis 2:15 he gave us a very special role and responsibility in tending and caring for the garden – the trees and the creatures that depend on those trees. So, that’s our second main point: Trees are vital for the diversity of life – a diversity that God cherishes and calls us to serve and preserve.

A tale of two trees

Thirdly, we have the two special trees in the garden – the tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

[SLIDE 12]

Let’s look at these two trees in turn and see what we can learn from them – of course we’ve no idea what they actually looked like or what sort of fruit they bore. Firstly, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat its fruit on pain of death, but of course they disobeyed, ate, lost their life-giving relationship with God, and were thrown out of the garden. Theologians have spilled plenty of ink on exactly what this tree symbolises, but one thing seems to be clear: it’s not knowledge itself that’s wrong. God doesn’t want us wallowing in ignorance. It’s rather the way we go about getting that knowledge that can be the problem. Grabbing at it for ourselves in a selfish and disobedient way is what causes the fall from grace, and all its consequences. The sin is not just disobeying God’s command; it is also the attempt to gain knowledge independently of God.

This becomes clear when we look at the other tree – the tree of life. Unlike the tree of knowledge, this reappears again in the Bible, several times in Proverbs and then right at the end in Revelation.

[SLIDE 13a]

In Proverbs 3:18 we’re told that Wisdom is a “tree of life to those who take hold of her.” Wisdom, in the Bible, is different from simple knowledge. We’re told Wisdom begins with ‘the fear of the Lord’: ‘Fear’ not as in terror but as in awestruck respect – the kind of feeling we get when we watch the wonders of nature – a range of ice-capped mountains, the crashing of ocean waves, a numberless herd of Wildebeest, or simply looking at a tree – maybe a massive Redwood, or an ancient Banyan or Oak tree, and wondering how many human lives it has stood there for and what changes it has weathered. In the Bible, wisdom is closely related to observing and learning from wild nature.

[SLIDE 13b – click to advance]



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King Solomon's wisdom, according to 1 Kings 4:33 included speaking "about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon (*surely the most famous tree of that era*) to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish." Wisdom is knowledge for life which is rooted in a healthy relationship with God and a healthy relationship with God's creation – including trees. That is what the tree of life is about. It is about God-centred wisdom, wise living, in the light of God's power, God's knowledge, God's love.

[SLIDE 14]

That's why, in the Bible's final chapter Revelation 22, the vision of God's new creation when all things will be made new and this world will be cleansed of all that is wrong and radically reshaped, contains the tree of life – planted on both banks of the river of life, and bearing fruit every month, fruit that brings healing and restoration. New creation is Eden restored and re-imagined – a garden city rather than simply a garden – but one where the life of trees is important.

Of course the other great tree in the Bible is the cross on which Jesus Christ – the carpenter King – was crucified.

[SLIDE 15]

In 1 Peter 2:24 this is referred to in the words: 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree'. Throughout Christian history, the cross has been seen as the great tree of life – rejected in the Garden of Eden, but replanted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Through this tree we are shown that God's wisdom is very different from the world's wisdom. It overturns all our attempts to save ourselves, and it reminds us that we are totally dependent on God.

[SLIDE 16]

Bringing this together, the two trees in Eden are about a fundamental choice that we face as humans. Do we choose 'life' and God-centred Wisdom, or death in the form of self-centred 'knowledge'. They are two ways of seeing the world. Is it a place of vibrant, multiform life, each part miraculously infused with God's touch, or is it simply stuff to be grabbed, exploited, consumed and destroyed – like the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The choice God gave Adam and Eve is our choice today. The choice we face is to choose life, or to choose self-seeking knowledge which leads to death. In Deuteronomy 30:19, God says to people of Israel "This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live."

Acting for Trees

And that brings us back to how we relate to trees today in a practical down-to-earth way. We've come a long way from Eden, and we've destroyed most of the trees God created en route. There are many things we can do:



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- Firstly, if trees are good for us, then get to know some trees – especially your near neighbours!

[SLIDE 17]

Maybe set yourself a target of learning 10 different local tree species in the next month. Or why not work with together to produce a booklet or pack for schools on your local trees.? Churches in several countries have developed booklets describing the trees growing in their churchyard or local area, identifying them, labelling them and explaining what they are useful for. A Rocha India helped a church in Bangalore produce a 40 page booklet, mapping, photographing and describing all the trees in their churchyard, and how they are useful as well as beautiful. Or why not do a tree census in your local community? In Anapolis, Pennsylvania, A Rocha USA worked with local people in a project called 'Listening to our Trees'. Ginny Vroblesky, who coordinated the project, says: "Local trees generate wonderful opportunities for conversations within a community. People are curious about where they live. Scientists may try to justify preserving trees from a utilitarian point of view. Residents, however, are interested in trees for other reasons: 'I planted a tree when each of my children was born.' 'I remember when this whole area was an apple orchard.' Or they may plant trees to make a statement or to attract particular species of birds."

- Secondly, if trees aren't just for us but we've destroyed so many of the world's trees, why not plant some trees? *[If you are doing the 'Act of Commitment' involving planting seeds or trees – see Service Order – then mention that here.]*

[SLIDE 18]

You can plant trees locally or support A Rocha, or its offshoot Climate Stewards, to pay for trees to be planted in tropical countries where deforestation is worst and the need is greatest. Supporting A Rocha's Tropical Forests Programme is a great way of both planting trees, and also supporting the wildlife and the people who live around them. Wangari Maathai, the Nobel Peace Prize winning Kenyan who inspired the planting of millions of trees said this: "After all, Christ was crucified on the cross. In a light touch, I always say, somebody had to go into the forest, cut a tree, and chop it up for Jesus to be crucified. What a great celebration of his conquering [death] it would be if we were to plant trees on Easter Monday in thanksgiving."¹ Planting trees helps absorb CO₂, prevent soil erosion, give shade and shelter, and can produce fruits, nuts, fibre and medicines as well as a home for local wildlife.

- Finally, if we're to choose life and God's wisdom, rather than the self-seeking knowledge that our materialistic world is built upon, we need to look hard at our lifestyles and our priorities.

[SLIDE 19]

¹ www.greenbeltmovement.org/a.php?id=115 'Heaven Is Green: An Interview With Wangari Maathai'



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If we are part of one earth community along with all the other creatures and the plants and trees, then our human footprint has grown much too large. Just as we depend on trees, so trees depend on us. If we are to see a future both for our children and for trees that could live for hundreds of years, then we need to change. When we look back at our lives, their significance does not consist in the size of our house, car or bank balance, or in the number of possessions we have. Psalm 1 pictures us as just like trees. What trees need is very simple – deep roots into good soil, plenty of sun, and rain in due season. What we need is equally simple – to be rooted deeply in dependence on God and God’s word, and to know our co-dependence on God’s creation. Jesus put it in terms of seeking first God’s Kingdom and his righteousness, and everything else will follow on. Perhaps we need trees not just for oxygen, food, water, medicine, shade and fuel. Perhaps we need to learn from them too. Perhaps then we’ll see Isaiah’s vision come to pass: “You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper, and instead of briers the myrtle will grow. This will be for the Lord’s renown, for an everlasting sign, that will endure forever.” (Isaiah 55: 12-13)



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