

SERMON

Forests: a storehouse for Biodiversity

The Bible is full of trees! We find them from the first chapter of Genesis (1:11-13) where God creates “seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds” and declares them “very good”, to the final chapter of Revelation (22:2) where the river of life flows through the heavenly city with, on either side, “the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month” with its leaves bringing healing for the nations. At the heart of our faith is Jesus who, in the carpenter’s workshop became familiar with the texture of wood, who spoke of fig trees, prayed amongst the olive groves of Gethsemane, and whose body was broken on the tree of Calvary, before he rose again, mistaken for a gardener. In his book *God’s Trees: Trees, Forests and Woods in the Bible*¹, Julian Evans, formerly both a Professor of forestry and a Director of Tearfund, writes in detail about the importance of trees and forests in the Bible, both literally and as metaphors and illustrations of God’s work.

All this is a reminder that our faith is not only spiritual. Our faith is also deeply embodied in the physical world God has placed us in. It is not about being saved *from* the world. Rather, we are saved *for* the world that God loved so much that He sent His only Son (John 3:16). Our calling as disciples of Jesus the carpenter is to enable all of God’s creation: people and pangolins, towns and trees, fields and forests to worship their Creator God in fruitfulness and flourishing. As Psalm 96:12-13 says, “Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy. Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.”

The tragedy of the COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us again that we are one world, interdependent on and with nature, and that the idea humans can exploit and mistreat forests and biodiversity without suffering ourselves, is a dangerous illusion. Experts have been warning for years that deforestation could lead to new pandemics. A 2018 article in the journal *Frontiers in Microbiology* by a group of European scientists warned of links between deforestation and the potential emergence of new coronavirus illnesses². It reminded us that human health, animal health and the health of the environment are deeply connected. When we destroy forests, animals find their way into cities and villages. When we use wildlife for food without very careful precautions, we risk animal viruses transferring to humanity.

Let me share a case study. On the edge of Bangalore lies Bannerghata National Park, a forest that is home to Indian Elephant, Leopard and even Tiger, as well as many other creatures and, no doubt, the viruses they harbour. When I was a child in Bangalore, we called it ‘the garden city’. It had clean air and a population of slightly over 10 lakhs. Now Bangalore has exploded: including the outskirts it has a population of over 100 lakhs (1 crore) and Bangaloreans sadly nickname it ‘the garbage city’. The growth of the city has put pressure on Bannerghata forest. Christian conservation organisation, A Rocha India (<https://www.arocha.in>) has been studying the forest and its human neighbours for nearly 20 years. Urban sprawl and crop-fields have gradually spread right up to the forest boundary, and put pressure on wildlife habitats. A Rocha India has worked hard to reduce and mitigate human-elephant conflict around Bannerghata but, whilst we can easily see the elephants emerging from the forest, we cannot so easily track the viruses coming from other creatures that could easily transfer to the forest’s new human neighbours. The explosion of India’s cities, and growth in general, are putting huge pressure on forests and the wildlife they contain.

According to the *Forest Survey of India*, 21.67% of India’s land surface is covered by forests³The quality and percentage vary hugely from state to state. Haryana and Punjab are less than 4% forested, whereas the North Eastern states are 70-90% covered in forests⁴. In some places the cover is dense, mature primary forest, which leads to the greatest biodiversity. In others it is degraded, secondary (re-planted) or just scrub forest with poor and

¹ <https://www.dayone.co.uk/products/gods-trees> available digitally from <https://www.logos.com/product/49123/gods-trees-trees-forests-and-wood-in-the-bible>

² <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmicb.2018.00702/full>

³ <file:///G:/Tpf/Working%20plan%20preparation.pdf> (2019 figures)

⁴ <http://fsi.nic.in/isfr2017/isfr-forest-cover-2017.pdf> (2017 figures)

stunted tree growth. More than one in 5 people in India (275 million), especially tribal communities, depend on forests for food and livelihoods⁵, and the Government of India's target is that forests should grow to cover 33% of land⁶. Yet, there is a tension between rapid economic development and sustainable forests. After public pressure, a draft new National Forest Policy that would have opened up forests to commercial development and potentially evicted forest-dwelling communities, has now been withdrawn⁷.

So, as Christians, how should we think about forests in our worship and prayer, and how should we change our daily behaviour in the light of the Bible's teaching? Here are five suggestions, and you'll notice they spell out the word TREES:

- **TEACH that forests belong to God.** Actually, the whole earth and all that is in it belong to God (Psalm 24:1), and that includes forests. Thus, we cannot see forests as purely an economic resource for us to exploit, or as a source of dangerous animals and diseases for us to destroy. In Psalm 50:10, God says "for every animal of the forest is mine". Forests, globally, are where the greatest concentrations of wildlife – biodiversity – are located, and as we destroy them or degrade them, we are destroying the fabric of life itself, and are destroying God's unique fingerprints in each creature that becomes extinct. It is false teaching to say that this world was made only for human beings. In Colossians 1:16 we read about Jesus that "all things have been created through him and for him", and *all things* includes the forests of our world. Pastors, parents and Sunday School teachers need to make sure that all Christians realise that forests are created to the glory of God, not primarily for human enjoyment. Of course, God does generously allow us to use the good fruits of his creation, but not to abuse and over-exploit them.
- **REPENT for the sin of deforestation.** It may seem shocking to speak of deforestation as a sin. We are used to sins being our moral and spiritual failings. However, biblically, sin is anything that destroys God's good purposes, distorts God's self-revelation, or damages the relationships that God intends to exist. To cut down a tree is not necessarily sinful, although it is good advice to plant and care for two trees for any you cut down. Also, remember that a tree, especially if it is a mature tree, is not just a piece of wood. It is a community, a home to many plants, fungi, lichens, insects, birds and animals. Forests contain the greatest reservoir of the world's biodiversity, they give us clean air to breathe, they help regulate climate and rainfall, they prevent soil erosion, they provide foods, fuel and medicines. Globally we are losing almost a soccer field of forest every 2 seconds, 18.7 million acres annually, mainly to ranch cattle and grow palm oil⁸. At the heart of these statistics are the sins of greed and selfishness. Most deforestation is not to meet our basic needs, but to feed our cravings for things we don't really need. Deforestation destroys our relationships with our fellow creatures, with God's creation, and ultimately with God, who speaks to us through what has been made (Romans 1:20). As Christians we need to repent for our personal sins and the sins of the cultures we are part of.
- **ENJOY and celebrate forests** and the good things they give us, in our worship and daily lives. In Genesis 1:29 God says, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food." As we've seen, the trees and forests remain God's property but He gives us the use of them for food. I don't find it surprising that many cultures worship trees or pray under them. Of course, they are mistaken in worshipping created things instead of the Creator (Jeremiah 10:3-5). However, perhaps the confusion begins because God has made trees to symbolise so much of how God himself provides for us: shelter, safety, nourishment, medicines, fuel, homes and much more. In scripture, trees are pictured as worshipping God. In Isaiah 55:12 they "clap their hands" in response to God's word, and in Psalm 148:9 "fruit trees and all cedars" (along with many other parts of creation) are urged to praise the Lord! So, as Christians we can worship God both *for* and also *with* the trees. That could include worshipping outdoors, under a Banyan, Jacaranda, Mango or Palm tree, or bringing the good fruits from the trees as part of our offering in our worship.

⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/india-forests-threat-180425104442969.html>

⁶ <https://web.archive.org/web/20120126223253/http://ifs.nic.in/rt/book/page3.pdf>

⁷ <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=194511>

⁸ <https://www.worldwildlife.org/threats/deforestation-and-forest-degradation>

It might include planting native trees in our church compound, or having a TREE-bute campaign (as A Rocha Philippines does) where trees are planted for anniversaries, births, deaths and baptisms.

- **EXERCISE CAUTION and careful stewardship of forests and forest products** through reducing our waste and consumption of resources. If deforestation may be sinful, then it can be a spiritual discipline for us to reduce our unnecessary use of forest products. This is a very practical form of discipleship. We can make sure we don't waste paper (from trees), and only use paper that is recycled or from sustainable sources (where 2 or more trees are planted for each one harvested). For our furniture and building materials, we should avoid hardwoods that often come from primary forests and take many years to grow. If we visit parks, forests and jungles, we should make sure we take only photos and leave only footprints, respecting the integrity of the ecosystems we are visiting. In Deuteronomy 20:19-20 we read God's word to the people of Israel occupying the Promised Land. They were allowed to use trees for certain things, but not allowed to chop down fruit trees, or destroy trees pointlessly. It's one of many places the Bible teaches us to use the gifts of God's creation sustainably and with restraint. To show respect for God's creation is ultimately a way we worship God, by showing respect to what God has made so well.
- **SUPPORT CAMPAIGNS for the protection of forests** and forest-dwelling communities, and for careful regulation around the use of forest products. Our faith calls us to be active citizens, to pray for our leaders and, in a democratic society, to hold them to account. If powerful companies and their political friends have plans or policies that will destroy or degrade important forests, and threaten the human communities and the wildlife that lives there, then as those who believe in a God of Creation who is also a God of Justice, we should oppose them with whatever legal steps we can. If the illegal trade in wildlife, and wildlife products, is happening in our county or our state, we should shine the light of truth upon it and call those in authority to act. Christians have always been those who speak up for the persecuted and voiceless, and today perhaps that includes speaking up for trees and forests. Romans 8:22 speaks of the groaning of God's creation, as it suffers but also as it waits in hopeful anticipation for God's Kingdom to come in full. By campaigning for the protection of trees and prophets, we can help articulate the groans of God's wounded creation.

So, in conclusion, we are called to stand up for forests, the storehouses of creation's biodiversity. We can do this through **teaching** that forests belong to God, **repenting** for our part in deforestation, **enjoying** and celebrating forests, **exercising** restraint as we steward trees and forests, and **supporting** campaigns to protect forests and those who depend on them. We have many wonderful examples in Christian history, from Martin Luther, who is quoted as saying "If Jesus Christ were to come back tomorrow, I would still plant a tree today", to William Carey who not only preached the Gospel and translated the Bible into Bengali but also produced the first scientific book on the plants and trees of India. If we play our part in protecting the forests that God has planted, then we can join with the Psalmist in saying: "Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy. Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness." (Psalm 96:12-13).

Rev. Dr. Dave Bookless is Director of Theology for A Rocha International (www.arocha.org). In India, A Rocha has been working particularly in the Bangalore area with local churches and with practical conservation projects – www.arocha.org/india.