

'Trees of Life' Lent Course: Week 3 - Thursday 7th March 2024

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Week three, indeed. And so we can see the wood for the trees. I thought we'd have a quick recap as to where we've got to so far. And then we'll kick off with some stuff for tonight.

Because trees and wood and fruit and bushes and vines, all of that stuff, which is summarized as we've seen with this Hebrew word, *ets*, found all the way through the Bible, every page almost. And they're deeply connected to the story of God and us. Indeed, trees, fruit, and so on, are used as metaphors and images for both us as humans and for God himself.

Central to this idea of being fruitful, these two trees, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil, found at the center of this hilltop, this mountaintop, even Garden of Eden, and where Adam and Eve are given a choice between these two trees.

Eat from the tree of life, which represents everything that's God's goodness, God's life, God's presence. Or eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which represents doing things our way and choosing our wisdom over God's wisdom.

[1 : 13] And this choice between God's ways and our own ways, it's a running theme through the Bible, and is actually a choice which is often associated in various stories with wood or trees, often which are found in high places.

And we saw last week, so the stories of Adam and Eve, and of Noah, and of Abraham and Isaac and so on, they're all taking place with wood connected to them on high places.

We also looked last week at this, the story of the burning bush, again on another high place, Mount Sinai, where Moses encountered God and was asked by God to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt.

As we saw, Moses took some persuasion to do as God asks, but he eventually said yes. And we left it last week by looking at the ways in which the God who was present, shall we say, in the tree of life.

The God who was present in the burning bush, then became equally present with the people through this thing, the tent, the tabernacle.

[2 : 23] This tent with wooden poles that could therefore be moved around the desert, and in which God's presence was said to dwell in the midst of his people. So that's where we got to last week.

And I guess just as the burning bush was reminiscent perhaps of the tree of life, you know, a bush, a tree, and *etz* in Hebrew, that symbolized God's presence.

So what's also interesting is that the tabernacle was intended to be seen not only as a place where God's presence dwelt, but to be seen like a mini garden of Eden as well.

It was kind of meant to be a glimpse of how things were meant to be, where God was just as accessible to people as he was to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, present in the midst of his people.

So for example, how do we know that? Well, just as the central features of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil, so the tent itself was the central feature in the tabernacle courtyard, this walled garden, if you like.

[3 : 35] That's worth noting what was there for inside this central tent because it included things like this, which was a golden lampstand, which God had given Moses. Very specific instructions about how to build it.

So we read that Moses was told, make a lampstand of pure gold, hammer out its base and shaft, and make its flower-like cups, buds and blossoms of one piece with them.

Six branches are to extend from the sides of the lampstand, three on one side and three on the other. Three cups shaped like almond flowers with buds and blossoms are to be on all six branches extending from the lampstand.

It's kind of furniture instructions, it's kind of IKEA instructions for their day, I guess. Maybe not an Allen key in sight, though, thankfully. But you've got language here of buds and blossom, of flower and branches.

So what do we think the shape and this lampstand itself is meant to represent? What does that remind us of? A tree, excellent. Ooh, nice one, Neil.

[4 : 48] You're on fire tonight, mate. Yes, a tree. And because it's got seven branches, seven being a number associated with God's presence and the fullness of creation, you know, seven days of creation and all that, the lampstand is like a tree that brings light.

We could say in the tabernacle brings life to its people. It's a tree of life, in other words. So what seems like quite a, you know, over-elaborate, even boring set of instructions is actually a way to ensure that this lampstand, this menorah, reminds people of the tree of life.

So there's a lampstand, which was inside this tent, but then there was also this thing, the Ark of the Covenant, the wooden box, covered in gold, that contained the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments.

How might we describe the commandments if the lampstand was the tree of life? I guess we could say that the Ark of the Covenant represents the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you know, the choice.

Are you going to do things God's way, in God's commands, or are we going to do things our own way? And it's backed up this idea that that might be the case because Moses is told by God that no one should touch the Ark of the Covenant.

[6 : 12] That's why only certain people could carry it when they were on the move, and only then could they carry it by using poles, not with their hand. And if you recall, Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark, Indy and his colleague here, they know not to touch the Ark.

They know to use poles when they find it, and they lift it and they carry it in much the same way that the ancient Israelites would have done as well.

There we go. That's what it looked like. There we go. And so for a fictitious Indiana Jones, but especially for the ancient Israelites, these were the instructions that they must not touch the holy things, i.e. the Ark of the Covenant, or they will die.

Now, holding that instruction in mind, don't touch the Ark of the Covenant, what did God tell Adam and Eve in the garden about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?

Do you remember? Yes, I'm looking at Neil, because I want to give you two out of two there. Well done, well done. Yes. Don't eat from it, basically. You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it, you will certainly die.

[7 : 32] So there's this parallel there, for sure, between the tree of knowledge and the Ark of the Covenant. And indeed, just to help us ram home the point, really, we're told that God placed cherubim, you know, winged angels, at the entrance to the Garden of Eden.

And in what was on the top of the Ark of the Covenant, yeah, cherubim, two cherubim there, angels guarding access to that box in the same way that angels guarded access to the Garden of Eden.

And so, this tabernacle, here's a little computer version of it. Tabernacle was, therefore, where God's glory could be encountered, because entering the tent was like returning to the Garden of Eden, a garden-like tent with these visual reminders of the trees of Eden, even the incense that was burning was made from tree sap, you know, reminding them about God's promise to be with them as their tree of life, but also the importance of choosing a trust in God's wisdom and not their own by touching the tree of knowledge of good and evil, or, in other words, taking law into their own hands.

And so, this theme of the tabernacle representing the Garden of Eden continues with what the tabernacle eventually becomes and is replaced by, which was the temple in Jerusalem.

So, whilst in the wilderness, this tabernacle was ideal, by the time the people of God settled in the land of Israel, they were keen to build a permanent home for God to dwell in, a temple.

[9 : 11] You know, it's that kind of idea, you're fed up of camping, we want to move into a premier inn, we want some bricks and water, it seems, for God to dwell in. Now, initially, God says, I'm not keen on this. Indeed, I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day.

I've been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. Wherever I moved, did I ever say, why have you not built me a house of cedar?

And God makes a good point, you know, this was working in some ways. Overall, God, it seems, was happy to carry on camping, if you like, but eventually, God says, okay, if it will help you, build me a temple then.

So, it was King Solomon, the son of King David, who was the one pushing for a temple in the first place. David's son, Solomon, ends up building a temple. And if you're going to build a temple, the best place to put it is on a high place.

That's where people built temples in the ancient world. So, the city of Jerusalem was their capital and the chosen high place was one in Jerusalem called Mount Moriah.

[10:21] Now, we've mentioned Mount Moriah before. Can you remember where Mount Moriah cropped up in a previous little story? Any ideas?

No. Unlucky, my friend. That was Mount Sinai. Ah, but do answer again. Any ideas where Mount Moriah is mentioned, Barbara?

Yes, it was. Excellent. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well done, well done, Bob. So, that was the mountain in which Abraham was stopped from sacrificing his son Isaac. If you remember, he carried some wood and Isaac carried wood up to this high place for this offering.

So, this combination of all this stuff about whether they would follow God's ways or not. So, the same high place that Abraham and Isaac were on, that was the high place that was used for the temple.

But if you remember also last week, where was the very first high place that's mentioned in the whole of the Bible? Was the Garden of Eden.

[11:26] Yes, indeed. So, Garden of Eden is high place from where all the rivers flowed. And so on, this high place in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, Solomon builds the temple of God.

A temple to house the Ark of the Covenant, the lampstand, and so on. And what does he build this temple out of? We mentioned these in the first week.

Ah, yes, nice one. Yeah, the cedars imported from Lebanon. And so, when Solomon builds this temple on this high place with all of the stuff that's connected with it, we're told, he built the temple and completed it.

He lined its interior walls with cedar boards, panelling them from the floor of the temple to the ceiling and covered the floor of the temple with planks of juniper.

He partitioned off the rear of the temple with cedar boards from floor to ceiling to form within the temple an inner sanctuary called the Most Holy Place. The inside of the temple was cedar, carved with gaulds, is that how you say, and open flowers.

[12:32] Everything was cedar. No stone was to be seen. So, yeah, it was built of stone. But it was covered in wood.

Everything was cedar. Everything was eights, we might say. Everything, if you like, was trees. And again, this is what it probably looked like in Solomon's day.

Here's the temple that Solomon built here. Now, we're told that having put all the wood panelling in, Solomon overlaid much of the wood that he'd put in with gold.

He obviously liked a bit of bling. In fact, Solomon's temple eventually had not one, but ten lampstands, ten trees of life, if you like.

You know, Solomon didn't do things by halves. He was a man of excess with everything he did. So he had 700 wives and 300 concubines, for example. Kept his hands full. But the temple becomes this kind of in-your-face, over-the-top representation of Eden.

[13:35] Indeed, by way of driving home the kind of Eden imagery in the temple, we gathered that Solomon decorated the temple with 400 bronze pomegranates.

So it wasn't just trees and cedar that was represented. It was fruit trees, in fact, all these pomegranates. And we can talk about excess and did Solomon overdo it and so on.

Was that really in line with God's wishes? But we're told that whether or not God wanted all the gold or not, in his grace, it seems, God's glory did indeed come down and dwell in the temple on this high place in Jerusalem just as he had been present in Eden and in the burning bush and in the tabernacle, all high places, all wood-related, all God's presence and all the way of saying, you're going to follow my way or your way.

So, bit of a long-winded introduction but pause in there for a little bit. A few questions, perhaps, in light of all that for us to consider by way of trying to apply all that historical stuff to our context and our lives today.

So, for you, how important is symbolism to you in your faith and what symbols matter most to you? Secondly, in what ways might a building be a help or a hindrance to the way we live out our faith?

[15:05] The Israelites went from open-air stuff with Abraham in the early days, then to the tabernacle, so a tent on the move, then to a building. What are pros and cons, perhaps, of having a building in a way we express and live out our faith?

Think about this place, our church building. What does this church building say about our faith? What does it kind of symbolize? What's the first impression, perhaps, as people walk in about the kind of God who we serve?

And then lastly, if the idea of these holy places was that they would represent the Garden of Eden, how might St. John's, our building, our people, perhaps, become more like a Garden of Eden for people?

So, four questions, give you a few minutes to chat, some responses to those between yourselves, and then we'll get some feedback, which we're going to have recorded, and Mary was telling me she gave some feedback last week, and her friend said she sounded very brummy on that feedback, so don't worry about your accent, I don't worry too much about mine, so we love a bit of feedback, and we'll put that on the website, but have a chat amongst yourselves, grab another drink if you want to, and then we'll get some feedback from these questions.

It's always hard to know which questions may or may not inspire us to talk or not, but thanks very much for that. So, let's have a little bit of feedback if you fancy. First up then, how important is symbolism to you in your faith, and if so, it's important, what symbols matter most to you?

[16:38] It's about symbolism and symbols. Yeah, Paul? So yeah, I just suggested to me, personally anyway, was the cross, but also, somebody mentioned to me and I'd forgotten about, was a fish, symbol of a fish, and obviously, I used to have one as a car sticker in the back of my window, and that made me pray.

So yeah, it is important in my life anyway. The fish made you pray? The fish made me pray, yeah. In what way? Do you know it was there? Because I saw it, yeah, so it prompted me in the morning, yeah, it was basically, I looked through the rear window, saw the fish, and it was a prompt for me to think about, you know, what am I going to do today, God?

Yeah. Thanks, Paul. Thank you. Other people, how important is symbolism to your faith, and if so, what kind of symbols? I was saying that in centuries gone by, when people weren't perhaps as literate or read, able to read, then things were very, very different, so things like stained glass windows, for instance, would be able to tell you a story, and all symbols were very, very important in times gone by, and I think we've come full circle, because we're now such in a visual age, like you can pop anything you like on that TV screen, that we're overindulged with those things, and so we basically think, oh, they're not important, and perhaps we've lost something with that, that we don't always see things in the visual, even though we're a visual age, we don't actually attach much importance to visuals.

Yeah, I guess the screens are like a mobile stained glass window, aren't they, in that sense, it can flick around, but whether that's helpful or not, another question, what else, anything else about symbols or symbolism you were chatting about, Don?

Yes, one of the other things that we mentioned as symbolic is the Bible, pretty well every Christian home would have a Bible, in generations gone by, of course, it was the family Bible, and though it was symbolic of the family, it was symbolic in the Christian book, and today, we still have that symbolism with Bread for Today, for instance, the daily reading.

[18:50] Yeah, thank you. Thank you. I've been in court for a while, but we still use the Bible in court, don't we? And again, I guess in a contemporary culture where a lot of our Bibles might be on our phone or on the screens, the symbolism of the book becomes perhaps less than maybe it used to.

Thank you for those. Question two, in what ways might a building be a help or a hindrance to the way we live out our faith? Me and Chris said the same thing when we first came to this church.

It's quite nerve-racking walking through the doors of somewhere new, and we're used to going to different churches, so how much more would somebody who isn't used to going into a church going to feel intimidated by the physical space?

So that's a negative, but there are so many positives about having an association with a church building. We were saying about, you know, you can go into a church and feel so quiet and spiritual just because of that physical environment, so there are pros and cons really.

Just following on from what we were just saying, as regards to a garden, my eldest daughter used to be, well, she used to be more or less a pastor at the church. She was really, really well into this church, but she's had some fallouts with some people that go there.

[20 : 03] The consequence of that, she doesn't go anymore, but she's developed a relationship through media, Facebook or whatever, and she actually meets in a garden with other people and they share their faith together in a garden.

Thanks, Paul. Thank you for that. Trish. I was just saying that it's certainly easier in a church that's flexible like this with flexible seating and it's always warm.

It hasn't got that cold feel of, you know, traditional brick churches. That when people come in, if you walk into a traditional church, everybody's looking forward because of the way the pews are.

So you're not welcomed by the congregation because everybody's looking in the opposite direction, whereas here people can turn around and they look at you and we're all sitting in such a position that it's easy to see people coming in and recognise people and perhaps going over and saying hello.

And we're not so precious about our seating, are we, as they are in some churches. I know some of us do like to sit in the same seats. I admit, I like to sit close to the band, but it is a bit more flexible, isn't it?

[21 : 12] And that's much more welcoming and much more comfortable than being perhaps in a traditional church building. Yeah. Thanks, Trish. Thank you. I guess that the old sort of classic design of a church with pews where everyone's facing the front and you walk in the back, there is an anonymity to that.

You can sneak in a bit easier in the back. So I agree with you, Trish. It's nice having the sideways on, but you're never going to sneak in here very easily, are you? Kathy?

I think we were talking about in our group just the idea of the different types of churches. So I think that the way that this church has been built, because it's nice and open and light and warm, people can be drawn to it.

But I was saying equally sometimes with heritage comes like a beauty. So you can be drawn to that too. So that's kind of like a positive. But I think if you're a person that doesn't, you know, want to go to church and that kind of thing, it could be a real negative to try and kind of come through the door. One of the things that I tend to find in my role is people will say to me that they know where we are here. Actually, that one's not too bad. That one seems to be okay.

[22 : 25] And I'll say, have you been? Oh, no, no. I don't know if I'd go. But actually, that one's not too bad. So it's quite a juxtaposition. Yeah. So try and encourage people to kind of come through the door.

But I do get a lot of that. Thank you. Thank you. Marie, can I put you on the spot? Because you meet probably people who come in most days who haven't been in a building before.

And what's the general take on people who come through our doors? The general take is I think people tend to be a little bit surprised just at the fact that the place is warm and it's bright and it's airy and it's welcoming.

And there is many, many people sort of say, oh, you know, I didn't know it looked like this inside. And then I end up showing them around. You know, this is this room, this is that room.

And they generally are impressed, actually. And they feel very comfortable. You can see that they're very, very comfortable in it straight away. I know we're all very, very grateful for this building.

[23 : 26] And, you know, whatever it was, 30 odd, 35, 40 years ago when all the prayer was happening to get it up and built and the money that went into it and the dedication. The legacy of that faithfulness is still going on to this day and hopefully for another 40, 50, 60 years.

Get a century out of this place at least, I'm sure. Oh, yeah. Coming back to what you're saying about what does the church building say about our faith. I mean, when we first moved there, which was about, what, 18, 19 years ago, it was a Sunday evening and Catherine and I decided we'd just go for a walk around the neighbourhood.

And as we were walking past, we saw the screens from outside. And we decided that we'd come closer to have a look. And there was an evening service going on at the time.

So we came through the doors and we were greeted by Paul Applin. He welcomed us. I said, I'm not here for the service. I'm just looking around. And his words were, well, you're quite welcome to stay if you want to.

It hasn't long started, but do feel free to stay. But the way he said it, there was no pressure. It was just welcomed us. And I said, no, we just can't stay. And then he said, have you got any young children?

[24 : 41] And he said, yeah, we've got a little daughter. Well, she's a big girl now. And he said, well, we do these children clubs. We've got this club. We've got these for kids. And he was so informative and so welcoming that we thought to ourselves, we've got to come back, you know.

So he made us feel welcome and we came back and we've been welcomed ever since and supported ever since. So just the fact that the way he greeted us into the building encouraged us to come back.

It's interesting, though, from what you're saying about it was the screens in a way that got your attention first, the flickering of that and the lights on and so on. And then that was backed up more so by Paul giving you the welcome that he deserved and he's great at.

It reminded me of when Moses sort of burning bush and turns aside to look. It's that kind of encounter almost. And that makes Paul appalling God in the fire, doesn't it, as well, then, in that sense. So, Marg and Nivon.

Thank you. That's only to sort of like cement really what's been said. When I'm on duty for funerals, people come in that don't come to our church, they'll probably travel a distance, and they make comment about the church.

[25 : 49] Not just it's warm, but the warmth of the church. You try and make people welcome down. It's a funeral, for goodness sakes. So you try and make them as comfortable as possible.

But it's not just about that. They might comment about the service, how lovely it is, how sensitive it is, and the whole package, really. They're really blown away when they're going out.

And they do thank you so much, thank you so much, thank everybody so much. They thank Ruth, they thank Matt, whoever's preaching, really, from a dancing vicar to whatever.

And that wasn't Matt. We had a dancing vicar. But no, honestly, such of like, on a wide, that's what I'm trying to say, on a wider circle of people that come here, they're blown away.

And it's, I'm very proud when I'm out there. Thank you, thank you. Yeah, the dancing vicar was neither Ruth or I. It was a guest minister, wasn't it? But yeah, yeah.

[26 : 49] And Yvonne. When I've been outside, doing the garden, at the front, I had one or two people say to me, what is this building?

And I used to tell them that it was a church and we have a lot of people come and we have different things on. And they say, well, I've been past this place many a time, but I've never give that a thought.

Other people have said, is this a community where you can come in anytime and have a drink and make friends? And I said, it is a church, but you can certainly come in and make friends.

And on certain days, we do have coffee and cake. They just, some people just don't know. And now the cross is gone, it's even worse.

We need a cross outside. Indeed. Thanks, Yvonne. That is one view. That is one view. And we will talk about it, actually, because obviously we put a tree in the place of a cross and there might be some significance to that, but we'll see.

[27 : 56] Barbara. We were also saying on this table that it's so nice that it's a community, not church, but community center at times, because it's church when we meet as church.

But there are so many groups that come here just to be community and do their, whatever they do. And it's all inclusive. You wristband.

Thank you. Thank you. All right. That's all very positive on the whole, which is great to hear. Last question then. How might St. John's become more like a Garden of Eden for people?

I take Yvonne's point about maybe a cross outside, that symbolism of who we are and what we believe in. But how might we become better, more like a Garden of Eden than we currently are without resting on our laurels?

So we were talking a bit about the goodness and generosity flowing out of the church and how that is a bit like a Garden of Eden. But we also would like to declare war on the shipping container, which we think cuts off the park.

[28 : 59] Yes. That is under consideration as well. It does stifle the view somewhat. You're in a provocative mood today.

That's good. Trish. Well, I said that to become more like the Garden of Eden, we have to move to a high place. And Kathleen said, well, we're on High Street anyway, aren't we?

So there you go. She'd already got it sussed. Yeah, yeah. There is a little slope going up here.

Thank you. Any other thoughts on how we might become more garden-like as a church?

Paul. We already said that we, in many ways, we already are because, obviously, there's more social media. There's more work that you do now, which is an open invitation to people to come anyway.

And I don't think there's anything bigger than that and Facebook, et cetera. So it's like word of mouth. Also what people were saying earlier on about people coming to events. We've got Christmas and we've got, you know, and people always come back year after year or pass it on.

[30 : 02] I think we've got all those little groups going out to schools, et cetera. I think we do a lot already. If we're thinking about high places and the Sermon on the Mount and the feeding of the 5,000 and the Garden of Eden, then surely one major example of that is come and get your beef burger, play in the park.

Thanks, Dom. Yeah, play in the park, getting out in the park, being church out there. Yeah. All right. Any final thoughts? Sorry, Val. I missed you out there. Last one then for now.

I just wanted to say that my idea of the Garden of Eden here is the people, the people who belong to the church. It's because of the people that are here that people come here.

That's my opinion anyway. Thank you. Yeah. And we may well come on to that as well. Go on in, Dave. Little appendix. I'm getting deeply spiritual now.

In the Garden of Eden, if I understood you correctly, it was about choice. And I think possibly that's what we do try to do here is offer people a choice.

[31 : 15] We're saying, look, we're here because we have a faith in God. We're not saying, you've got to have it or else, and here's the dotted sign on the dotted line. But we are offering people a choice to join in with that or not.

Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. Thank you for that. All right. So, if we think about what comes next.

Indeed, after the temple was built, and it was all singing and dancing and so on, Israel enjoyed a bit of a honeymoon period for a few years, but not for long once it was open, because during King Solomon's reign, and then certainly after he died, things went wrong for Israel pretty quickly.

Indeed, just five years after Solomon's death, which in the Bible is just six chapters on from the temple being dedicated, Jerusalem was invaded by a guy called Shishak, who was the king or the pharaoh at the time of Egypt.

We're told this, that having invaded, he carried off the treasures of the temple of the Lord and the treasures of the royal palace. He took everything.

Now, everything, this word everything, presumably it means the Ark of the Covenant went. It means the golden lampstands were taken from the temple. It seems, if you like, the trees have been taken out of Eden with this invasion, and once more, we'd never hear in the Bible about the Ark of the Covenant again.

[32 : 48] It never gets a mention. It's not so much that Elvis has left the building. It seems God has left the building in many ways with this robbing by the pharaoh. And from there, well, things seem to go further downhill.

And there's centuries in the Old Testament stories of mainly dodgy, if not despicable kings, you know, all sorts of sinful practices and idolatry and further invasions that the people of Israel are a victim to.

You've got the temple Solomon built. That's eventually destroyed. And the people of Israel are exiled in foreign lands. Now, God isn't absent in these stories.

But the story of the Bible becomes much more focused, it seems, on the prophets who implore the leaders to repent and the people to turn to God.

Indeed, this is how one early prophet, Isaiah, this is the language that he uses about this problem. He says, Surely you will be ashamed of the oaks which you have desired, and you will be embarrassed at the gardens which you have chosen.

[33 : 58] For you will be like an oak whose leaf fades away or as a garden that has no water. It's an interesting language, you know, ashamed of the oaks you've desired with the language of the

Garden of Eden in mind.

Thank you. And then not only is it the wrong tree, it's an oak whose leaf fades away. It's a garden without water. If you remember that Psalm 1 that we looked at a couple of weeks ago, the prayer was to be like trees planted by the streams whose leaves don't wither, bearing fruit in season and so on.

This is like the opposite of Psalm 1. Which is all pretty tragic, really, how things deteriorated and how far the people had fallen, how far from Eden and the tree of life and the burning bush and the tabernacle and so on the story had developed.

And yet, a bit later, with the same prophet, there is hope, actually, though, says Isaiah. And why? Well, because he says this, At some stage in the future, a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse.

From his roots, a branch will bear fruit. The spirit of the Lord will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the spirit of counsel and of might, the spirit of the knowledge and reverence of the Lord.

[35 : 22] He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes or decide by what he hears with his ears, but with righteousness. But with righteousness, he will judge the needy. With justice, he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

Let's unpack this tree imagery a little bit. It says initially up the top there, a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse.

Sounds painful, perhaps, but who was Jesse? Well, Jesse was David's father. So a shoot from the family tree of Jesse will emerge, a descendant in the family line of David, a new son of David, if you like, will appear.

There will be more than a shoot, though, because this shoot, as we see, becomes a branch, a branch which bears fruit. Now, interestingly, the Hebrew word that we translate here as branch is the word *netza*, *netza*.

Any idea which town in the Bible begins with *netza*? Nazareth, yeah, *netzareth*, *nazareth*.

[36 : 41] It all comes from this word, branch. And Nazareth, as we know, was the hometown of Jesus. So the shoot becomes a branch, becomes, if you like, a Nazarene who will bear fruit.

And what kind of fruit? Well, it says here, the spirit of the Lord will rest on him, and the wisdom he displays will be for the justice of the poor of the earth.

The spirit of the Lord will rest. The spirit of the Lord will be upon him. And again, where else have we heard that phrase? The spirit of the Lord is on me.

Where does that come? Any memory of that? It comes in Luke chapter four when Jesus begins speaking in the synagogue saying, quoting, the spirit of the Lord is on me.

Now, which synagogue? Where does he say that message? Not quite Jerusalem. No, he says it in his hometown of Nazareth. Yeah, this branch town.

[37 : 46] Indeed, he reads aloud from the prophet Isaiah, this time quoting from Isaiah 61. And let's just, let's have a little clip and see exactly what, what Jesus says with this in mind.

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the spirit and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues and everyone praised him.

He went to Nazareth where he had been brought up. And on the Sabbath day, he went into the synagogue as was his custom. He stood up to read and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him.

Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written, The spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

[38 : 56] Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.

He began by saying to them, Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. Jesus says, The spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor.

Again, very similar words and that one from Isaiah 11 talks about this shoot, this branch, this Nazarene, we might say, emerging, who comes as the spirit rests on him to bring good news to the poor.

And what's interesting is that just a bit further on from this passage from Isaiah that Jesus quotes in the synagogue there, a couple of verses on, Isaiah goes on to say this, they, by which he means the poor, the captives who've been released and so on, they will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.

And so through Jesus, this shoot which becomes a branch who bears fruit, others will be planted in order to become righteous themselves, planted to show the best of God's love in their lives, planted it seems, we might say, to bear fruit.

[40 : 32] And so straight away with these first words in public that Jesus shares in Luke's gospel, we see all these different themes coming together and being established that Jesus is from Nazareth, this branch town, he's fulfilling prophecy by being a shoot and a branch in the royal family line of David, he's a branch who's come to bear fruit, the fruit of the good news for the poor, freedom for the oppressed, sight for the blind and so on, all while proclaiming God's blessing so that others might themselves become like the trees that we were meant to be, trees planted by streams of water in order to bear fruit in season, to display the Lord's splendour, as Isaiah says.

Now what's clever, I'd say, is that these are all themes which Jesus himself carries through and at one point in particular draws together in another passage, which is this time found in John's gospel, chapter 15.

So one little final clip for tonight and after which we'll have another couple of questions before rounding things off for today, but see if you remember these words that Jesus shared.

I am the true vine and my father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me as I also remain in you.

[42 : 19] No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine.

You are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing.

If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers. Such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned.

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. Again, echoes there of all sorts of things from Isaiah, from Eden, and so on, from everything since.

[43 : 36] When Jesus says, I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear fruit. So with these words in mind, just a final couple of questions for us to consider by way of pulling everything together tonight.

And we'll get a little bit of feedback on these, but this is mainly for us to share perhaps with those around our tables. What does Jesus mean when he says, remain in me?

How might we do this? Or how would you say, actually, you are trying to do this in your life? What does it mean to remain in Jesus? And then secondly, how might we ensure the fruit produced in our lives is good news for the poor?

that seems to be the emphasis in Isaiah in particular and that Jesus picks up as the first thing he says in his public ministry, I've come to be good news for the poor. Now what does that look like? And how might we ensure that the fruit is biased, if you like, to the poor in our lives? So, a few minutes with this and we'll get some feedback and then we'll close.

[44 : 47] Good to hear the conversation but I'm aware of the time as well. I know you've been dying to know but West Ham are currently nil-nil at half time as well so, just to keep you informed.

That was down the recording, yeah, famous last words. Alright, so, just a little bit of brief feedback for a minute or two on these ones if you wish.

What does Jesus mean, do we think, when he says, remain in me, how are we doing this? How might we do this? Do we think, any thoughts you had on this?

Well done. Thanks Leslie. I think with me, although I've been a Christian since I was a little girl, I don't think I really, truly knew how to give myself to Jesus for him to remain in me and for me to remain in him until, as you know, very recently and from that point on, I do understand that I know I have given myself completely, utterly, 24 hours a day to him and he is in me and I am in him and I

can't forget about him.

I wake up of a morning, he's my first thought. I go to sleep at night, he's my last thought in prayer. Thank you. Thanks Leslie.

[46 : 13] We were talking about, I'd like to put in another word, Jesus says, remain rooted in me and that's where we get our nourishment from and we have to be careful what we take in.

Marie was saying, you know, what waters us? It can be the wrong things which mean we won't grow so well but remain rooted in him and even if the storms blow and, you know, we get wobbly bits, difficult times, if our roots are in him, we'll stand firm.

Great. Thank you. Cheers Linda. Mark. The first one, well, through worship personally for me and the remaining me's, I say loads, millions of times, yet not I but with Christ in me.

So, everything I try and do within church and out there, I'm reminded, yet not I but with Christ in me and the fruit that he produces within me, I hope, goes out in good news, I won't say to the poor but, do you know what I mean?

It goes out to other people that I hope it makes a difference and in worship it's really important and also, some songs are a prayer, popular songs sometimes, I pray Sunday mornings on my own ear and they are a prayer, a real heartfelt prayer and quite tear-jerking, it's important and he remains in me through worship and the yet not driving.

[47 : 50] Yeah, brilliant. Thanks Mark, thank you and again, the old hymn Abide With Me is based on these words remain, I think the King James version says abide in me or abide with me, yeah, thanks Mark, thank you.

Second question then, how might we ensure the fruit produced in our lives is good news for the poor? You can define poor perhaps in various ways but, what do we think this means?

How might we ensure the fruit produced in our lives does what Jesus says on the tin is good news for the poor? Trish, thank you. I think we were saying that because the tradition in this country is no longer that religion and Christianity is taught in schools in the same way as it once was, the children no longer have no hymns, they don't learn hymns, they don't, they do religious education but it's, they're looking at all, all religions not just Christianity.

so that has been lost from society. So the only way that people are going to know anything about church or Christianity is through us, is through us and I think we talk a lot in the house group about, you know, our mission field and Steve's mission field is in his workplace and Karen's is in her workplace and that's, that's where it is or in the supermarket queue or anywhere and everywhere that you are.

So, those are the people who are poor in a way but they're poor in spirit and poor in experience and poor in knowledge about Jesus and if we don't show an example and give it to them then they don't get it from anywhere else these days, do they?

[49 : 37] Yeah. Any other thoughts on this being good news for the poor in particular? I know this word poor is loaded and perhaps we don't always like using it because it feels judgy perhaps but Jesus only uses it so any thoughts on this?

Alright. That's your homework then. Think that one through because it really is an emphasis that Jesus has for his ministry. It sets the tone in this Nazareth kind of manifesto that he says I've come to be good news for the poor and I wonder how we might apply that for the way we live out our lives every day.

Alright. We'll press pause then there for tonight. Thanks very much everyone. Appreciate all the interaction and sharing and thoughts and engagement with that. Next week we've got two more weeks to go.

Next week we'll explore more of the ways in which Jesus' life is connected to trees and wood and Eden so if you are around we're good to see you again.