

'Trees of Life' Lent Course: Week 5 - Thursday 21st March 2024

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Date: 21 March 2024

Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] We've packed a fair bit in, I guess, to these previous four weeks prior to tonight, weaving our way through various stories in the Bible which highlight the deep connection that we as humans have with trees.

Trees, which after all, I don't know if you know this, but we share 50% of our DNA with trees. I don't know which half of you you might say is more tree-like or not, but 50% of you is.

Bit of knock on wood. There we go. But also, not just us, it's trees which profoundly connect with God. Trees and wood and fruit which help to illustrate perhaps the presence of God with us and the choice that we've given as to whether to live life in our way or in God's way.

So as we've seen over the weeks, from Adam and Eve to Moses, from Isaiah to the Psalms, from tabernacles to temples, from vines and vineyards to the Garden of Eden and the Garden of Gethsemane, from the cross itself to the Garden in which Jesus was raised.

All these stories and more are connected by the presence and the imagery of trees, these rooted, shooting, growing, fruitful pictures of what life with God and what life with Jesus is all about.

[1 : 19] And so if you recall, last week we focused on Jesus as the true vine, the one from whom we as branches are enabled to bear fruit.

And then we looked at the significance following that of the cross, this wooden way through which Jesus meets with death, but overcomes it in order to offer us life.

Indeed, what's interesting when we look at the life of Jesus, I think, is the way in which he regularly identifies and connects himself with trees or wood.

So most obviously there is the cross, this wooden stake which Jesus himself carries and is then nailed to, almost becoming one with in some ways.

And we've seen, as we said just now, that elsewhere Jesus calls himself the true vine, in John 15, and that his blood was like wine, you know, the product of the fruit of the vine.

[2 : 27] Thinking of the product of the fruit of the vine, what was Jesus' first miracle that's recorded in the Gospels? Any ideas? Water into wine. We know that one, don't we? Excellent, excellent, yes.

Again, in John's Gospel, interestingly, it's his turning of water into wine, this miraculous sign that he, the vine, could produce wine, wine which was then given for all to drink and celebrate with.

It's interesting that that sets the tone, if you like, for the rest of Jesus' ministry. Now, there are various other wood or tree connections with Jesus, which we haven't yet mentioned.

For example, we're going to have a look at a little clip of a reading from John's Gospel, again. This is from early on in the Gospel, where Jesus calls some of his disciples, and most notably in this little clip, of a disciple called Nathaniel.

So have a look at this, and then we'll unpack it a little bit afterwards. The next day, Jesus decided to leave for Galilee.

[3 : 38] Finding Philip, he said to him, Follow me. Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathaniel and told him, We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law, and about whom the prophets also wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

Nazareth? Can anything good come from there? Nathaniel asked. Come and see, said Philip.

When Jesus saw Nathaniel approaching, he said of him, Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.

How do you know me? Nathaniel asked. Jesus answered, I saw you, while you were still under the fig tree, before Philip called you. Then Nathaniel declared, Rabbi, you are the son of God.

You are the king of Israel. Jesus said, You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.

He then added, Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the son of man. All right.

[4 : 56] So, little story there from John's gospel. But I know Ruth looked at this the other week, you know, talk on Peter and the calling of the disciples and so on. But if we focus on the wooden stuff, the tree stuff from this little passage tonight, it's not least, I think, that Nathaniel is initially skeptical about Jesus because he knows that he comes from Nazareth, saying, you know, can anything good come from there?

Nazareth, as Nathaniel suggests, it was a pretty ropey place to live in Jesus' day. And yet, as we've seen in previous weeks, this name Nazareth is based on this Hebrew word, Netzer, Netzeroth. Remember what Netzer means? Any memories? Wood, kind of wood, yeah, a particular bit about wood. Netzer means shoot or branch.

So, Jesus was a shoot from the stump of Jesse, you know, the tree line of David, if you like. So, yeah, even from an unglamorous town like Nazareth, of course, anything good can come out of anywhere.

So, something good can come out of Nazareth, even though Nathaniel was a bit skeptical. Anything can shoot, can grow from Netzeroth, shall we say. What else though?

[6 : 13] Well, Jesus, we're told, he notices that Nathaniel is sitting under a fig tree. This idea of sitting under trees, I don't know if we can remember any other times in the Bible where people are described as sitting under a tree.

Any stories back in the recesses of your mind spring out from that? Marmaray, trees of Marmaray, Marmaray, yeah, that'd be Abraham when he hosted three mysterious visitors that may well have been divine.

Yeah, he was sitting under a tree when they came. Anyone else spring to mind sitting under a tree? Jonah, yes, the shirt, yeah, yeah.

We've got Elijah. He was resting under a tree, we're told, but not resting in a positive way. He rested under a tree and wanted to die, basically. He's pretty depressed, is Elijah.

And yet God came and provided sustenance and refreshment for him. We've got Gideon as well. He's described in Book of Judges, angel of the Lord come and meet him under the oak of opera, or Oprah, we're called.

[7 : 21] Not the daytime American chat show host, but, you know, something similar anyway. So, sitting under a tree is a place, it seems, in the Old Testament of encounter with God.

But equally, sitting under a fig tree in particular, that's interesting because to sit under a fig tree, that seems to be an ancient way of saying that actually all is well with me and God.

So, for example, Prophet Micah, he talks about it this way when he says, everyone in the future in a good time to come, will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree and no one will make them afraid for the Lord has spoken.

So, sitting under a fig tree was a sign that God is with you. Jesus, therefore, obviously spots and encounters something in Nathanael that he feels he can work with because it seems Nathanael is under a fig tree and he tells Nathanael this, he says, here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.

Which is quite a weird way to talk about someone sort of the first time you meet them as a sort of icebreaker, I suppose. But it's mention of no deceit in Nathanael.

[8 : 42] Any ideas which biblical character in the Old Testament was famous for being deceitful? Again, can you remember any stories where there's a lot of deceit going on in one particular character?

David? There is a bit of deceit in David's? Yeah? Yeah, Bathsheba? Yeah? That's the one I'm looking for. Yeah, David's right but Jacob in particular, this guy here, there's many times he's a bit ropey it seems but there's one occasion in particular when he deceives his blind dad, Isaac, into blessing him over his brother Esau by wearing a goat skin so that when Isaac puts his hand on Jacob he thinks it's his much hairier brother Esau.

You know, it's a weird story but Jacob nicked his brother's birthright it seems. A right deceiver was Jacob. Indeed, Jacob's name is changed to Israel after he wrestles with God as his hip put out and so on.

And here with Nathanael it's as if I think Jesus is saying ah Nathanael you're an Israelite you're a Jacobite if you like but you're honest there's no deceit in you unlike your forefather Jacob you'll do for me I can work with this come and follow me and so he set up this kind of story of thinking about Jacob it seems already so with the story of Jacob in mind here again what Jesus then says at the end there he says this very truly I tell you you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the son of man now what's the picture there do we think Jacob's ladder yeah this way of connecting heaven and earth you know echoing it seems in Jesus words here the vision that Jacob has of a ladder joining heaven and earth in Genesis chapter 28 now Led Zeppelin may well have sung about a stairway to heaven but here Jesus says no I am that stairway I am that ladder I am the one who connects heaven and earth and you'll see angels ascending and descending on me I am the ladder and in Jesus day what would a ladder have been made out of wood exactly yeah so Jesus in this instance is the wood which connects heaven and earth what's more there are other wood related things that Jesus is likened to again all of this is in John's gospel there's quite a theme of this in John such as in John chapter 1 verse 14 when we're told this that the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us we have seen his glory the glory of the one and only son who came from the father full of grace and truth now where's the wood in this well the word that's translated here as dwelling any ideas again what the original word that's used literally means shelter yes it is shelter and another word for shelter could be a tent and actually the literal word that it seems in the original language is tabernacle tabernacle [12:07] Jesus came and tabernacled among us so in the opening chapter of John's gospel Jesus is being likened to this thing the tabernacle this wooden framed tent in which people experienced God's glory residing with them in much the same way that Jesus came to tabernacle and reside with us or again in John's gospel Jesus also likens himself not just to the tabernacle but to the temple itself so you read this one time Jesus said destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again and the Jews replied this temple took 46 years to build and you are going to raise it up in three days but Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body so again the temple was where people met with God and what was the temple originally famously built out of it was cedar wood wasn't it again a wooden kind of idea it's almost as if

John's trying to spell out look you don't need a building to meet with God because Jesus you're here in the flesh Jesus saying I am the temple I am the way in which you can meet with God I'm dwelling among you yes elsewhere Jesus also compares himself to the stonework of the temple calling himself the cornerstone for example but this theme again all these are from John's gospel of Jesus being the ladder the tabernacle the temple the vine and so on they're all wooden ways in which Jesus adopts Old Testament imagery as pointing to him as the ultimate connector between heaven and earth now in many ways this the wooden cross I guess is the culmination of all this imagery the cross being the symbol and the means by which Jesus entered into death in order to overcome it with his resurrection life but what's fascinating

I think is that as the Bible draws to its conclusion with the book of Revelation it's not actually the wood of the cross that takes center stage now instead we see the return of a tree which first appeared way back at the beginning of Genesis indeed in a vision that John has in Revelation of what the eternal future with God looks like here's what we're told says this then the angel showed me the river of the water of life as clear as crystal flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city on each side of the river stood the tree of life bearing twelve crops of fruit yielding its fruit every month and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations and there's a lot in that little passage there that vision that John has if we just go through this a little bit together so for a start

I guess it might remind us where else did we first come across in the Bible a river flowing down where did we first come across that Eden yeah the Garden of Eden those rivers that split into four and so on that we looked at the Garden of Eden this high place from which everything else flows but what's the high place in this passage where the river's flowing from yeah from God himself the throne of God and the Lamb from Jesus himself and where does this particular river where does this one flow down are we told down the middle of the great street of the city the city which is interesting so Eden the Garden of God it seems in the language has been transformed in Revelation into the city of God we're meant to see it I think as a new Eden much more populated place and yet despite this kind of urban setting what are we told that stands each side of the river that flows through the city the tree of life yeah the same tree which represented

God's presence God's life in the Garden of Eden so there's a lot of Eden imagery and continuity seen here now I don't know about you it's quite difficult to picture what a tree standing each side of a river looks like it could be a kind of split trunk I guess through which the river runs but why might it be significant that it's on both sides of the river you know for example where else does a river being crossed appear in the Bible Jordan yes spot on you're on form tonight this is good this is good yeah the Jordan river in particular where Joshua for example he's with the Ark of the Covenant and the Jordan splits in two and the people go across the river was split it seems to get from one side to the other but here the tree of life is split it seems and is on both sides of the river that therefore implies I think that in this perfect age to come

[17 : 44] God is accessible on both sides of the river you know wherever you are for all people from both sides and that's a theme which the next sentence in this backs up because we're told that the tree of life bears what what does a tree of life bear yeah twelve crops of fruit now why is the number twelve significant here do we think twelve tribes of Israel yep indeed yep the twelve tribes of Israel in other words all the people all the people and yet this tree it yields its fruit with twelve months every month it seems not just in season as in Psalm 1 but now we're told every month it's a super fruitful ongoing eternal fruit bearing tree and yet this final line here what are the leaves of the tree for what are we told here the healing of the nations now that's the bit that's interesting to me because the leaves of the tree of life being for healing

I think it's fascinating as a thought because it suggests that the new heaven and the new earth is still a place of progress and growth and renewal and healing healing from the past hurts from this life in order for us to find harmony with each other and ourselves in the next life and the fact that we're told that the leaves bring healing to the nations again it implies the whole world as in all the nations of the world all the nations to which the twelve tribes you know the vineyard of Israel were meant to be a blessing but which they somehow failed in their calling to be all of those nations will be healed indeed in this new heaven this new earth this new garden city all of that hurt all of that failure that exclusion is being put right by God as the nations all the people are offered healing and it's a captivating picture which I still think captivates people today indeed I don't know if you've seen this place here this is just outside

Birmingham New Street station and it's a sculpture of the tree of life in Revelation it's a carved tree and I don't know if you can see just down the bottom there it's got the verse from Revelation the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations you go straight out of New Street TK Maxx in the background and you're hit with this pretty profound verse from Revelation it's actually a memorial to the 21 victims of the Birmingham pub bombings on New Street back in the 70s and with that context you can see why this verse of hope is so fitting when thinking about the troubles in Northern Ireland that spilled over here you know it's a prayer for healing between the nations between the south and the north of the island of Ireland indeed this passage in Revelation I'd say it's a beautiful picture it's a beautiful vision of what life with God is ultimately about you know hope and healing all nourished and enabled through the fruit of the spirit and by the leaves of the tree of life and so in this picture who is the tree of life that brings this healing it's God yeah it's Jesus

Jesus if you like the true vine it's the Holy Spirit the one who grows the fruit of the spirit in our lives and offers us ultimate healing indeed all that we've seen over these these five weeks all of this wood all these trees all these images that we brainstormed on week one in which we pretty much now looked at all of them they all point to the ways in which God is with us with us through Jesus with us through the spirit and with us through the invitation to feed on the fruit and the wine of the vine of life to feed on the tree of life and so with all that in mind some questions for us therefore to consider and hopefully apply all that we've been looking at to our lives today three questions today and you can take these as lengthy as you wish but thinking of all the tree related stories and images that we've looked at what aspects have stood out for you and why and secondly how might the importance of trees in the biblical story shape both our view of creation and our actions in caring for the environment and then a final question with Genesis to Revelation in mind to what extent might the tree of life rather than the cross be a more fitting symbol for our faith that could get you talking hopefully that one in particular but three questions have a ponder of those around your table and then we'll get some feedback as well grab a drink grab some snacks and we'll come back together in a few minutes time alright let's have a go at some sharing shall we so these three questions then thinking of the first one thinking of all the tree related stories and images we've looked at what aspects have stood out for you and why anyone brave enough to share a little bit maybe of what

struck them over these recent weeks

Leslie well we thought of Genesis and the Garden of Eden with the tree of life and the tree of evil and whatever and we thought that was really as you say it's the tree of life is in the Garden of Eden and then Revelations you've got the tree of life again so that's what stuck out for us thanks Leslie what else has stuck out for people trash but the tree by the river someone yes and you put an image up on the screen didn't you the tree by the river and the tree will always be flourishing and producing fruit because it's nourished by the river that's a lovely image maybe like a tree planted by the water that yields its fruit in season and leaves don't wither that's the one yeah thanks Trish anyone else anything else that's stuck out Margaret

[24 : 43] I was thinking if instead of a cross outside the church we had like the tree that you showed us that they'd put up the wooden tree if we had that it would be much easier to explain to people who asked why have you got that funny looking tree out there and you could tell them that it was the tree of life and you could explain how important all of that side of it was instead of the cross which they just associate with Jesus being hung on the cross yeah thanks Margaret we may well come on to that in a bit the tree outside yeah Neil over here yeah I like the image that we are like trees that image of it sort of coming out of the ground and growing I can't remember the exact wording but yeah I like that that we are like trees and very similar yeah we looked at that in

Genesis where Adam is created in the same way as coming out the ground as the trees were described as being created as well in that symmetry between us both yeah great any final ones on this question all right number two then how might the importance of trees in a biblical story shape both our view of creation and our actions in caring for the environment what about the application eco and environmental wise in all this the thing that struck me more recently I think it was one of Ruth's sermons the John 3 16 verse God so loved the world actually not just the people the actual creation and the environment God loved it because it was good what he'd made and he wanted us to look after it brilliant thanks Dave yep nice one Ruth yep what else here's a hand up from Trish nice one we were talking about upon Castle Ring particularly because we understand it's a managed forest can it chase but when they do take all the trees down and clear an area it's it's devastating to see it just the decimation is just it's dreadful although we know they're going to replant and we know it has to be done and it's part of the management of the forest we understand that but then when you relate that to the rainforests where they're just being cleared to make roads and and everything that's going on there it's just devastating isn't it that we're not caring for that element of our environment yeah I'm always struck with that verse the trees at a field will clap their hands go on Anne that's my song I've just been singing I was just thinking you know and it says we shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace and the mountains and the hills shall break forth before us and there'll be shouts of joy and the trees of the field shall clap clap the hands and we were just saying just imagine listening to all the trees in the world clapping their hands what a sound talk about a sound from heaven and

I was saying to Maria sometimes I'm in the garden and like it's a real windy day or you can hear the leaves blowing and stuff and you can hear the birds singing I just literally think that all those leaves are clapping their hands and the birds are singing and it just blows me away it's everyday you know it can never be like oh something I've heard before because it's just an ongoing beautiful thing nice one nice one I love that bit in the Lord of the Rings trilogy where is it tree beard when he sort of brought to life almost and then he rallies all the other trees to come and do that big invasion thing but it's the connection between the trees and I think they even reckon that within a forest the trees are communicating with each other and that the roots are all intertwined and there's something deep going on that we're not even aware of it seems in the ways that trees are so connected yeah anything else Leslie one of the things we also discussed was how if you didn't have trees on our planet well you wouldn't have a planet because trees are needed to give us oxygen they have our carbon dioxide also the roots go as you say deep underground so it's keeping the soil stable and one of the things

I mentioned was aspirin was made from the bark of a tree which was the willow tree so one of the first analgesias so again trees biblically and today are so important to us and our environment thank you yeah it's interesting all that medicinal stuff that comes from trees and we haven't mentioned this but when Jesus was given frankincense and myrrh as a baby that's tree sap different different trees I think boswellia tree I think is it frankincense comes from or myrrh and again there's medicinal purposes in each of those particularly myrrh as well that we know about so yeah anything else in

terms of environmental stuff I know you I know you're going it's not unpleasant I know you're going but I went to the Orkneys a long time ago I went to Kirkwall and then sailed out to Stronsay and there's not a tree in sight not one you know you look around and you can see the island in by the time you've turned around because it's only seven miles long and a mile wide and there wasn't a tree in sight and I thought what if I have a coach trip you know to come over to mainland England just have a look at a tree because there's not one and you see

[30 : 50] I like the thought of like a tree planted each side of the river and with like it growing a little avenue thing and then the trees being almost like a duvet so that it warms you and heals you and keeps you going and gives you encouragement and yeah yeah yeah that kind of thing so if you find a tree I'll give you a fiver yeah I'm off to Orkney sometime soon it's interesting I think the lake district it's it's a beautiful place I think it's George Mombia is it the journalist he was saying originally obviously that would have all been wooded and yet it's all been cleared for grazing and so on and then the landscape has completely changed and we think it's beautiful because it's so sparse and yet that's not how it's meant to be and then that contributes to all the flooding and decimation of nutrients in the soil and all that so yeah it's I don't know what Orkney was originally I imagine there were trees on it and perhaps such a small supply that they had to chop them all down but uh yeah thanks for that the importance of that and then final question with Genesis to Revelation in mind to what extent might the tree of life rather than the cross be a more fitting symbol for our faith what do you reckon to this

Neil well I think it's a more living we've got a living faith haven't we and I think a tree is more appropriate from that point of view because it shows life in all its abundance and it's living and it's growing and uh continuing uh because trees last for millennia at well hundreds of years so from that point of view I think it's a much more appropriate symbol although as Dave said much harder to draw you know if you want to do a quick cross it's a lot easier isn't it but yeah yeah yeah if you're treeing yourself yeah it might get a bit like think what is up with them so yeah there's swings and roundabouts isn't there thank you practicalities as well as theology there thank you thank you Mitch yeah we were um we were talking about this and one of the things we said if there was a 21st century marketing team in London and we said what should be the symbol of Christianity what would they come up with and we didn't think they probably come up with a cross and then we had a chat too didn't we about where the symbol of the cross came from and I was talking about I used to work at a school where there was lots of lots of different faiths and I used to work with a Muslim chap and um they find the symbol very confusing actually and he'd ask questions like why do you have a symbol of torture and death for your religion and uh that was quite hard to answer really and so I do think if there was something that's a bit more a bit more hopeful as Neil said that that might be easier to engage others not necessarily in an evangelical sense but just in a sense of of sharing what what the real true message of our our faith is because we're we're kind of preaching a gospel of love aren't we on the one hand and that for the people on the outside anyway the cross perhaps contradicts that thank you Mitch thank you yeah but interesting to think if it was a bit more modern times if there was a gallows or electric chair or a lethal injection or something would that have the same resonance that the cross has Kim that subjects covered by the alpha course I think it's not an either or I think it's a both because yes the tree of life is lovely it's beautiful and yes it gives us hope and it and and yeah there are all the biblical connections but without the cross and Jesus's death and resurrection got nothing to hang the rest of it on so to speak so from a fully paid up evangelical you've got to have the cross as well but I don't think it has to be just the cross however there is a word of warning about this is in in Australia the tree of life is a very popular you know Madonna used to wear a glitzy cross because it was jewelry well the tree of life is like that over there and a friend of mine who has got nothing to do with Christianity and didn't want anything to do with Christianity she wore tree of life earrings and a necklace and all that kind of thing so we had some interesting discussions but I think it's it's not either or it can be both it should be both yeah thank you Kim thank you all right any thoughts on this all right thanks very much for that final sort of chunk really will be good just to reflect on and I want to continue what we're looking at in that third question really and in particular to remember and and kind of respond to I think a comment that Yvonne made a couple of weeks ago about the decision that we took a couple of years ago to replace what was outside which is a wooden cross outside of our building with a tree instead the blue spruce that we've got out there now and

Yvonne said this a week or two ago and if you're listening online Yvonne hello by the way and I spoke to Yvonne a little bit about it after that session but it's just a helpful observation where I think Yvonne was saying how important for her having a cross outside the church was now when we removed the cross and then planted this tree the PCC agreed to it partly to save money as the annual Christmas tree that we'd had was becoming more and more expensive each year but I think for me the deeper the perhaps the more profound reasoning behind this decision it is all connected with what we've been talking through tonight but certainly what we've been exploring in this series now as Kim was saying the cross remains crucial both for me and I'd say for our identity as a church indeed the logo that we've got which I introduced actually when became vicar here it's got the cross at its heart you know a logo which we reproduce on pretty much everything that we do however in terms of our daily presence within our community you know on our high place if you like on our high street I'd say that that whether people interpret it this way or not actually planting a tree outside of our church building I think is a deeply spiritual statement you know having a living tree tree of life if you like speaks in a way perhaps that Neil was alluding to or Mitch speaks of new life new hope you know of an intention in a in a practical but also a symbolic way of wanting to be rooted in our community for generations to come and there's an old Greek proverb which I love which says this it says a society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they know they shall never sit I think in light of this series I'd suggest a church community grows great when old men old women each of us plant trees in whose shade we know we shall never sit and why because trees I'd say are a gift to and a sign of life for generations to come and so we've we've planted a tree that we light up to celebrate God being with us at Christmas it's a tree which as we've been hearing Leslie was saying you know help us provide the air we breathe it's a tree in which the birds of the air come and rest in much the same way as [38 : 53] Jesus talked about the mustard tree as a as a symbol of what God's kingdom is like you know a kingdom of growth and of hospitality of creation and life and in fact with birds resting in the tree in mind one little story for us which I don't think I've shared actually with with many people it was really when I was I was watering the tree during that hot spell last summer it's a thirsty tree so it takes a lot of water but one day as I was watering it outside I noticed that there was a I was a bird hopping around the branches of our fir tree outside a bird that I didn't recognize and it's this one a tiny little bird with a yellow streak on its head it's very tame you know looking for insects hopping around all within just a foot or two of my head I don't know if there's any ornithologists among us I had to look this one up because I hadn't seen it before turns out it's called a gold crest yeah it's Europe's smallest bird even smaller than the wren you know and it's one who specializes who loves spending time in spruce and fir trees and so I was enjoying this bird being close to me that looked pretty beautiful I was having a bit of a moment I guess with this this gold crest but as I was watching it hop about as I watered the tree some of a realization came over me thinking just simply really if we hadn't planted that tree this gold crest would never have been drawn to that place at that time or to the vicinity of our church and although I don't want to over spiritualize all of this it kind of the way I feel and sense maybe God speaking to me sometimes I felt as if God was saying to me in that moment you know do you see do you see that's what I want my church here to be a place of life a place of welcome and hospitality and of nourishment a place where those who wouldn't otherwise come here might find a home and so that little encounter with the tree and the gold crest outside that's partly what inspired me I think to begin to explore the importance of trees in our faith and partly why we're doing this this course this year because God is speaking to us all the time but if the Bible is anything to go by God's voice is especially audible for some mysterious eternal reason through the presence of trees you know all of which point ultimately to the one who is the tree of life now I get that the cross we took down was for some a sign that this is indeed a church you know but we've got that written on our walls outside more importantly I'd say people will know we're a church not by our building and not even by a cross but through us you know through the love and the welcome and the care they receive through the conversations they can have with Yvonne on the street when she's pruning the roses outside and the good news is I think that through services through little friends and dropping and f and f and creating space and so on you know through our YouTube channel through our giving through our prayers through the countless one-to-one conversations and the care we offer as individuals as a church enabled by God I think we're now welcoming more people reaching more people caring for more people than at any other time in the 140 year history of this church and that to me is something worth

celebrating and that to me sounds like good news of what God is doing in our midst did I'd say that actually that is the story of the Bible a story within which the cross is hugely important yes but ultimately I think as we've seen from Genesis all the way through a revelation for me I think it's the tree of life you know God's resurrected living healing nourishing eternal presence with us which is both the beginning but also the climax of the story the tree of life if you like is the good news and so I pull this and perhaps all that we've looked at together got one final video for us which I think captures this big story really well it's a it's produced by an outfit called the Bible project to do loads of videos and resources on YouTube and if you want to google them the fantastic stuff all on the Bible called the Bible project who I'd highly recommend but by way of conclusion for our course let's just take a look at this little video which sums up hopefully what we've been looking at over these weeks the story of the Bible begins in a garden where God and humans live together and the biblical authors want us to see this garden as a type of temple the top is the most sacred place the holy of holies where God's presence is most intense and that's where we find the tree of life so what's this tree all about well it represents God's own life and creative power that is made available to others in fact God's first command is that humans eat from all of the trees including this one so you're ingesting God's own life that sounds intense yeah this meal transforms the one who eats it or in the words of the story it leads to eternal life okay but on the way to the tree of life the humans have to pass by another tree called the tree of knowing good and bad and God says that eating from this tree will kill you how does it do that well it represents taking the authority to do what is good in your own eyes and when humans do that it leads to broken relationships violence and death and so here's the thing both trees look beautiful but one of them is a false tree of life and the humans take from this false tree of life and they're exiled from the garden for good which raises the question can anyone ever get back to the tree of life well later on in the story we meet a man named Moses and he encounters God in a desert tree on top of a mountain oh you mean the burning bush where Moses is told that he's standing on holy ground yeah it's a plant on a mountain radiating with God's life and power just like the tree of life and God tells Moses bring your people up to this mountain so we can form a partnership and this partnership will force them to make a choice will they follow gods of their own making or receive life from the true God and in this story they give their allegiance to an idol and it's just the first of many the story goes on to show generation after generation choosing gods of their own making and these idols were usually placed on tall hills like beautiful trees but they're false trees of life that lead the people into self-destruction exile and death it's like death's grip on us is too strong to resist is there any hope well let's turn now to the story of Jesus he came to announce that God's eternal life was available once again through him so Jesus thinks of himself as the tree of life yes this is what he meant when he claimed to be the vine that brings God's life into the world and Jesus invited people to eat from him yeah he was inviting people to trust him and be transformed by his life but Jesus also exposed how corrupt humans are how much they love false trees of life and so Jesus presented people with a new choice between life or death and this time they don't just choose death they also chose to attack the one who sustains all of life yes Jesus is led up to the top of a hill where he dies upon a tree the cross is the sad and violent result of humanity's desire to do what is good in our own eyes the tree of life has been overcome by the power of death well it seemed that way but Jesus said that he was a seed of God's life that would die in the ground but then grow into a plant that would bear much fruit so to defeat death Jesus went through it and now this new tree of life stands before us all we can eat from it but it will mean passing through through death like Jesus, allowing our old way of being human to die. So that a new humanity can grow in its place. Yes, Jesus said he is the vine and we are his branches. So not only do you eat from this tree, you're invited to become a part of it, helping produce its fruit so that his life and love can spread through us to others. And so the story of the Bible ends in a new garden, which is also a kind of temple, with the tree of life at its centre, providing healing and life forever to all choose to eat from it. Which I think is a pretty good summary of what we've got. We could have saved five weeks, couldn't we, if we just watched that at the beginning, I guess. I like that one. I like that one. Now, Neil, do you want to just share one thing you were talking with me about at the beginning?

This is a bit of a seed of an idea, if you excuse the pun. But just before we came out over here tonight, I thought, wouldn't it be nice if everybody had a tree? Highly impractical, as I'm sure all of you are aware. I mean, our garden's about the size of postage stamp, so it ain't going to work for us.

But then I looked online and I was looking at National Forest do a dedicate a tree thing, if you like, where a bit like a twinning your toilet, I suppose. Similar type of thing. And you can pick a tree, they'll give you a certificate, and you can put on it whatever you want, so we could dedicate it to the tree of life, to the church, we could have it in church, wherever. And it's about £15 to plant a tree sapling. And we thought, well, what about if other people wanted to do that as well? So, as I say, it's just an initial idea at the moment. But if anybody would be interested, Helen and I are going to buy a tree, if anyone else would like to donate, we'll see how much money we've got, and we'll buy however many trees we can get for that amount of money. Does that sound like an idea? If anybody interested? We'll come up with the practicality side of it over the coming week, and get back to you perhaps on Sunday or next week, if anybody would be interested.

[50 : 09] Thank you, thank you. And yeah, we'll share that on Facebook and the newsletter and so on. Tremendous indeed. Thank you, Dave. Thank you, Neil. All right. Let's pray. Perhaps I round off with a kind of gathering prayer for us.

So, Lord, we want to thank you for your love for us. Love which is eternal, and love which measures from Genesis all the way through a revelation and beyond either side, Lord. This idea of you being present with us in the tree of life, and that being your plan to be so close to us that we might know you as our Lord and our Saviour and as our friend. And Lord, we know, as we've seen over these weeks, and as that video demonstrated, Lord, that things go wrong in life, and we go wrong in life. And yet even that was something that you knew you could overcome.

And it took Jesus, and it took his death and his resurrection to do that. So, we'll be grateful beyond words for Jesus and the way in which his death on the cross and his resurrection into new life means that our lives, even though we die, can go on living forever with you. And Lord, that picture and revelation of that tree of life and the river flowing down from it, with the fruit each month and the leaves which bring healing, Lord. That's a vision of that heavenly, earthly future. But it's also something to aspire to in a way that you ask us to pray for your kingdom to come here on earth as in heaven. So, as we offer ourselves to you to be your branches, Lord, as divine, we ask that you would help us to be fruitful in this life in ways which bring your love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control into practical being, Lord, in a way we care for those you've given us to live alongside.

We ask you to help us to bear fruit for you. We ask you to help us point people towards you that they may know the healing of your leaves, healing which we know was demonstrated all through Jesus's life, healing which is always rooted in love and compassion. And as Mitch was saying earlier, Lord, as we look out and think about our neighbours and our community, in whatever way you lead us forward in the future, we pray, Lord, that those who we live alongside might find through us and ultimately through you a welcome and a love which maybe takes them by surprise but which ultimately resonates with their soul so that they would know they are safe and secure in giving their lives to you because you are the one that we can trust as the way, the truth, and the life. So, thank you, Lord, for all that we've looked at over these weeks. Thank you, Lord, for the Bible and the thread of trees which runs all the way through it. Thank you for your spirit which enables us to think on and meditate on and draw your truth out of the Bible and out of your voice speaking to us.

And in all of that we've looked at, Lord, may it all bear fruit, we pray. May there be application, whether it's planting trees in a practical way or the fruit in our lives. May it all speak of you, your love, your creation, your goodness, we pray. Thank you for each other. Thank you for this community. Thank you for the sharing that's gone on. And would you bind us together, Lord, may our roots intertwine so that we might become a forest of people who demonstrate your love in this place and far beyond, we pray. Amen.