

Sunday 10th January: Psalm 1 – ‘ROOTS’

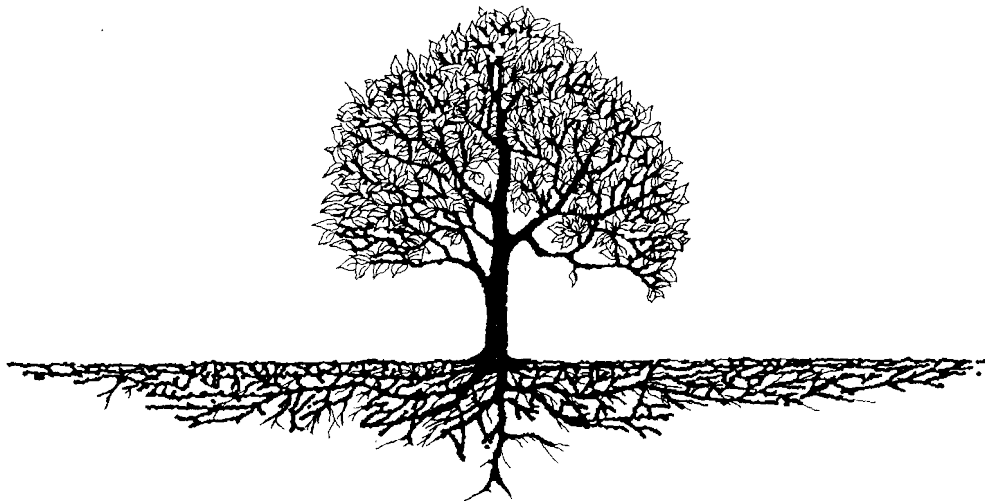
Trees are wonderful things. Many of us love trees. I certainly do. I love being close to them, just standing in their presence, admiring their size, their beauty, their dignity. My family have got tired of going out for family walks in woodland with me, as I find myself lagging behind, just gazing at all the lovely trees, usually taking pictures as I go.

Trees are one of the greatest parts of God’s creation. Science tells us they are hugely important in cleaning our air and regulating our weather. They protect us from flooding, and provide a haven for wildlife. They have a special place in most cultures throughout history. Trees heal, trees shelter, they stand strong and firm in all weather. They just *are*. Or rather, they have been, they are and they will be. That sense of majestic permanence is part of their appeal.

What’s your favourite tree, I wonder? We’re lucky to live in a city which is known as the City of Trees. There are 22 million trees and shrubs in Milton Keynes, not including the vast area of woodland in Woburn and Aspley just outside our city boundary. So it seems natural to kick off our new series with this fundamental image – **our lives, the bible says, are to be like trees.**

For the next few weeks we’ll be looking at psalms, under the general heading of Roots. What enables us to flourish as human beings, and especially as Christians? Where do we put our roots? Perhaps this question has never been more timely. Our lives are anxious, we face huge upheavals, there is a sense of chronic impermanence about everything, as laws change every week, and seismic shifts in our culture are at work.

How we need good roots! To cultivate the inner strength and resilience of a tree. And that’s the first and most fundamental point: **a healthy tree has good roots.** It can’t last without them. Here’s an image of what the average root structure for a mature tree looks like:



Look at how wide they spread! To survive this age, or any age, we need these kinds of roots. So how do we develop them? This psalm points us in one simple, but profound, direction: ‘Blessed is the one... whose delight is in the law of the Lord, & who meditates on his law day and night.’ (v1-2)

Our roots are ultimately found in one place only: in the word of God. And not just in a general sense, **the power is in the time we spend with the Word.** We give it our dedicated time and attention every day. That person, the psalm affirms, that person is like the tree planted by streams of water.

The water image is significant, because it adds an extra twist. Although all trees need water, most don't grow right next to water. Water in the bible is an image most commonly used in connection with God's Spirit. In other words, it's reasonable to assume that not only is the word of God about life-giving truth, it is also a source of spiritual power. It draws from God's life-giving Spirit. Jesus himself describes his words as 'spirit and life'.

So this image is **not just about stability, it's about sustenance**. As we soak ourselves – deliberate use of the word there – in Scripture, so we also grow in spiritual refreshment and strength. God's Spirit is imparted through God's Word.

These are the roots we need, roots which enable us to withstand even the harshest of seasons. Let's use this image to make a couple of specific reflections which are especially relevant for today.

First, the image of roots is a powerful reminder that much of life is about what's going on under the surface, not the visible stuff. It's the hidden work of God in our souls and spirits that will sustain us for the outward challenges. Very few people will see how much we read God's word and spend time in His presence, but this is where the hard work is done. We go into the presence of God in order to go out to the presence of others, and to do so with new energy and inspiration.

If you're not yet in the habit of reading the bible every day, can I encourage you to get into that habit as your top priority for this new year? This psalm reminds us that *the tree of your life will never flourish without it*. Use a daily reading to help you: we offer them every day on the church website, but there are lots of other options too. Find one that feeds your roots and stick with that.

Second, the late great church leader Rev. John Stott once commented that the Christian's daily journey had a newspaper in one hand and a bible in the other. We all consume a lot of news at the present, but never has it been more vital to hold our bible in the other hand. If we can invest as much time in God each day as we can in the newsfeeds, I think that's vital. It doesn't erase the reality of the news but gives us a better chance of being like that tree: stable, strong, bearing fruit regardless of the environment around it.

Finally, there is some helpful advice as to what we should avoid as well if we are to flourish like this tree. The psalms are always very realistic about the presence of wrongdoing around us (as the psalmist is here in verses 1, 4 and 5 of this psalm). And their advice is equally sensible as well: don't join them, and leave God to be the judge.

I want to suggest that this is very wise advice for us too at present. Ultimately, what God calls us to do is to guard our own lives and actions. There are very real concerns about what other people may or may not be doing, but our calling is neither to join nor to judge. To quote some lines from an old song I used to love: 'I can't change the world, but I *can* change the world in me.'

Over the next few weeks, we'll use our brief journey through the psalms to put our focus on the character of God: as our Rock, Shepherd, Judge and Guardian. These are the great truths we receive as we go deep into the word of God. Today, **let's resolve to nourish our roots again**. To delight in God's Word, to get God's perspective on our world, to find God's wisdom and inspiration daily to face the current crisis, to turn our fears and our world back to God in prayer, to stand firm in every situation.

'That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers.' Amen.