

## HARVEST TALK 2022 'THE TREE OF LIFE'

Let me start by saying that I **love trees**. I've always been a bit of a tree hugger – Alise will tell you how, if we're out on a walk in the woods, I will often stop just to gaze at a particular tree, and get left behind as I photograph it.

It turns out that **God loves trees as well**. Trees play a surprisingly important role in the bible, from the very beginning to the very end. Our two readings today are from the second chapter and the final chapter of the bible, and in both we see the tree of life at the heart of both God's original creation and his perfected creation.

Worth asking: **why does God use a tree as a symbol (even *the* symbol) of life?** Of all the things he could have picked, why a tree? That's the million dollar question for today, and as we think about that for a few minutes, I hope we'll see why God got it spot on, as he always does:

**Permanence** – if not disturbed, trees live a very long time. Anyone know the oldest tree? 1,000 yrs in UK and 5,000 in world. They're also one of the biggest living organisms on earth. Anyone know the world's largest tree? General Sherman, 275 ft tall.

*God's vision for life is that it lasts* – our life here is temporary and variable, but his desire is that we all enjoy eternity with him. Trees give us that sense of permanence, of irreplaceable life that endures. Think of the joy of every spring as the bare branches explode with life and colour.

**Provision** – we rely on trees to give us lots of stuff. True for us now, and even more true in ancient societies. Let's think about what they provide:

- **Food** – SHOW APPLE – what other foods do we get from trees?
- **Building and making things** – SHOW PENCIL and PAPER – look around you: what things are made out of wood? What other things?
- **Fuel** (lots of places around world – heating and lighting)

- **Helping us breathe** – trees are one of world’s great cleaners, taking carbon dioxide and turning it back into oxygen. If all the trees in our country were healthy, they would provide about as much oxygen as we all need to breathe in this country every year – so it’s putting back as much as we’re using. Isn’t that amazing?!

**Protection** – I’m sure many of us have sheltered under a tree in the rain. But trees also look after thousands of other species. What sorts of things do trees look after? Birds, bugs, caterpillars, bees, lichen. Oak Tree (one of most popular trees in UK) sustains up to 2,000 other species.

**Community (not a P!).** Most trees live in communities – we call them woods or forests, or groves or plantations. And what scientists have discovered recently is that, in many woods, trees actually look out for each other. In fact, they actually talk to each other. Anyone know how?

Roots: interconnect, including with fungi, which link up roots and take messages, share nutrients (food) and send alarms. It’s a community which looks out for each other – just as God intended for human communities as well.

**So trees are the right choice to symbolise life: from a tree we learn most of the valuable lessons about life: permanence, provision, protection and community.** No wonder that the Psalms use it as an image of a healthy life...

AND No wonder we see trees appear at many of the major points in the bible: not just the start and end, but also the Fall, the Ark, Moses and Burning Bush, the building of the Tabernacle and then the Temple, and of course the Cross. *It was Jesus’ death on a tree which ultimately paved our way back to the tree of life.*

**One last thing: trees are often overlooked.** Do you know how many trees in the UK? 30 million, 300 million or 3,000 million? 3 billion or 45 per person. For each one of you there are 45 trees. (As per opening prayer) in Milton Keynes there are 22 million trees – almost 100 for each person.

Trees are so often taken for granted – and actually that reminds me that we often take life for granted. We forget about God’s provision and protection and just focus on ourselves.

Harvest is a time to restore our gratitude – to refuse to take things for granted, and remember about the precious gift of life. And trees point us back towards that.

Today we can be inspired by trees:

- Perhaps to go back to our roots – to the things on which we base our lives
- Perhaps to commit to slow but steady growth, like the trunk
- Perhaps to prune off a few branches which are dead or overgrown
- Perhaps to show more visible fruit in our lives.

Chance to respond in a minute with a simple exercise

Finish with a short prayer: *Loving God, thank you for trees. Thank you for all they give to us and all the life they sustain. Help us to look after them, and but also to learn from them. Restore our roots, our growth, the fruit in our lives, and our gratitude. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.*

