

CELEBRATING TREES

St Laurence Ludlow 17th March 2019

There's a story about a bishop visiting one of his rural parishes in winter. As he approached the church he noticed a tree growing out of the tower and said to the Churchwarden, 'That doesn't look very good, does it?' 'No, Bishop', said the Warden, 'but come the Spring it'll look wonderful!'.

You don't need me to tell you about the wonder of trees. They give us the air that we breathe and have shaped your landscape for centuries.

When I chaired the Independent Panel on Forestry we travelled around England meeting people who were passionate about trees.

We visited the Forest of Dean. As we surveyed the mass of oak trees I made some comment about the beauty of nature. The local forester challenged me. 'No, bishop, that's not nature; that's not a natural landscape; that's a political landscape; those trees were planted to build ships for the British navy'. He was right. Every landscape is a political landscape for it reveals the values of those who planted and those who maintain them.

One hundred years ago the Forestry Commission was set up to replenish the Forests that had been denuded to build trenches and give protection to our soldiers in the First World War. That was a right and proper political initiative. Now we need the Woodlands to help us in a different battle, this time against the changing climate and against the threats to biodiversity.

In the Preface to the Forestry Panel's Report I wrote,

'Our forests and woodlands are nature's playground for the adventurous, museum for the curious, hospital for the stressed, cathedral for the spiritual and a livelihood for the entrepreneur.'

In short, they're vital for people, for nature and for the economy. But therein lies the challenge of how you balance all these different interests.

When I chaired the Panel the big surprise for me was to discover that Forests are the nation's biggest provider of recreation. But I then became aware immediately of the tensions that often exist between the needs of competing users.

But today we are in a church, albeit one without a tree growing from its tower! And as we gather to celebrate trees, woodlands and forests I want to offer a faith perspective. According to the Bible it is trees that mark the journey of life. Three trees to be precise. The Tree in the Garden of Eden the first human habitat for Adam and Eve; the Easter Tree on the hill of Calvary where our Lord was crucified; the Tree of Life in the vision of the New World, the New Kingdom that is coming.

We live by faith within this triangle, within this Trinity of Trees.

Firstly, In the book of Genesis God revealed himself as none other than a Forester. He planted a garden in Eden 'growing every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food'. So right from the start trees have an aesthetic beauty as well as a vital value for food. What's more Adam and Eve are called to care for the earth. In our reading it says God placed them in the Garden to till it and keep it. But the Jewish language is much stronger. They were to serve and preserve the earth. Their souls were married to the soil. They were the first conservationists.

Secondly, it was Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi, who reminded me that Jesus called himself exclusively 'Child of the Earth', the literal translation of 'Son of Man'. It was Jesus who taught us to pray for the earthing of heaven in the Lord's Prayer, 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven'. As a carpenter he worked with wood. When he was killed they hung him on a tree. And when he was as dead as the tree he was nailed to the whole earth quaked – twice.

I wonder if that Easter tree inspired A E Housman in his poem from the Shropshire Lad. His ashes lie in the ground around this church.

"Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
is hung with bloom along the bough
and stands about the woodland ride
wearing white for Eastertide."

Thirdly, in the Book of Revelation, the last book in the Bible we're given a glimpse into the New World, the Kingdom that is coming. Trees are there on the banks of the River that flows through the Heavenly City come down to Earth. The Tree of Life is laden with leaves 'for the healing of the nations'. In the New Earth, trees come centre stage in a healthy landscape.

And if we were in any doubt about how we should treat the trees of the earth then right back in the book of Deuteronomy the children of Israel were given the strictest instructions as they entered the Promised Land that they were never ever to destroy a fruit-bearing tree. Before anybody knew the science of climate change there was a clear human intuition about the importance of trees to our ecology.

The poet and priest Gerard Manley Hopkins had that same intuition. When he saw the Binsey Poplars being cut down to build sleepers for the Great Western Railway he wrote a poem and lamented,

“O if we but knew what we do when we delve or hew – hack and rack the growing green ...”.

So, the Bible gives us the grounds for valuing trees and for caring for the whole of God’s creation.

Indeed, St Paul understood that all things had come into being ‘through’ and ‘for’ Christ. Never have two such small prepositions, ‘through’ and ‘for’, possessed such theological meaning. This means that to desecrate or to destroy Creation is nothing less than a blasphemy for it is to undo the creative work of God.

But another dramatic insight that comes out of the Bible is that we are called in the Psalms to praise the Creator not FOR Creation but WITH all the creatures that God has made. This includes everything that has breath, all nature, including the trees of the fields that the Prophet Isaiah sees as clapping their hands in praise of our Maker. When we see ourselves as PART OF the created order rather than APART FROM it we have a proper understanding of our connectedness with all Creation.

Of course, in Genesis we are given dominion. But this is not a charter to rape the earth. That dominion is to be exercised on behalf of God in whose image we are made. That means we are to care for his creation with all the love with which he made it and sustains it.

When our children were small they loved playing with the Spinning Top. But of course it required their father to keep pumping it! I was glad the day they learned to do it for themselves! But just as that Spinning Top required a constant supply of energy to be what it was made to be and to do so God sustains and supplies the energy for creation to exist in this very moment. That is why Hopkins wrote in ‘God’s Grandeur’:

“nature is never spent ...

because the Holy Ghost over the bent

world broods with warm breast and ah! Bright wings.”

I shall never forget spending a week sailing up the Amazon River into the heart of the Rain Forest. We were an international group of religious leaders and scientists called together by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople to study the future of the Amazon. The water and the trees. The blood and the lungs of the earth. The sensation was palpable. It was there that I became friends with Nariman Gasimoglu a Muslim scholar from Azerbaijan. Together we have been studying both the Koran and the Bible to see how God lays upon us all the imperative to care for his world.

Nor shall I ever forget spending some days sailing in a dugout canoe up the Patuca River through La Mosquitia Rain Forest in Honduras in the company of a courageous man, Oswaldo Mungia, who had spent his life resisting the illegal logging companies that were destroying his community's habitat and livelihood.

In central America over the last 50 years they have lost 80 percent of the Forests.

That is unsustainable.

And once upon a time in this country it was said that there were so many trees you could traverse England without your foot ever having to touch the ground. It's one of the reasons that other countries resent us lecturing them about deforestation when they see that we have allowed our own woodland cover to be reduced to less than 10 per cent. As a nation we have a long way to go to match our European neighbours who have 30 to 40 percent of their land covered by forests. It was a Panel recommendation to increase woodland cover in England to 15% by 2060.

Trees are not to be left in aspic. They live and grow and die and seed their successors. Forests are best when they are managed, when the human family as part of creation works with nature to sustain the landscape. But it must be a partnership, another recommendation.

Wood is the most wonderful natural and renewable resource. At a time when we are realising the danger to the environment of the excessive use of plastic it is time for the woodland industries and the scientists, Retailers and the Government to work together to invest in trees and develop a more sustainable wood-based alternative.

But here in the Mortimer Forest I am preaching to the converted, 'bringing coals to Newcastle' or should that be 'trees to Ludlow'!

You know the beauty of trees. You know how they cluster and grow, how they commune with each other through their roots in the earth.

You know how they are indeed the hospital for the stressed and the playground for the adventurous.

I love that poem by John Clare 'The Hollow Tree'. It speaks of the tree as a physical and spiritual refuge.

"How oft a summer shower hath started me
To seek for shelter in a hollow tree
Old huge ash-dotterel wasted to a shell
Whose vigorous head still grew and flourished well ..."

And ends

"But in our old tree-house rain as it might
Not one drop fell although it rained all night."

It reminds me of that old hymn, "Rock of Ages cleft for me
Let me hide myself in Thee."

We take refuge in that Easter Tree that lies between the Tree of Eden and the Tree of Life. The Tree on which Jesus died and reconciled Earth and Heaven.

The Easter Tree of Calvary is the Tree of Reconciliation.

And that is a fitting place to end. I know there have been tensions locally on how to sustain the forests and I know too that there are steps to find a common way forward.

I planted a tree in Mortimer Forest this morning on my way here. I like to think it was a tree of reconciliation.

I planted it with a prayer:

“Holy Jesus
Earth’s own child
And Heaven sent
Who crafted wood
And died on a tree
Come in glory
And renew the face of the Earth.
Amen.”

We pray this for the sake of our grandchildren and for the whole of Creation, and for God’s sake that the trees will continue to clap their hands and flourish.

And let us not forget the African Proverb,

“We have borrowed the present from our children”.

Amen.

Lent 2019

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