

Closer to the Heart
A Sermon by Mr. Tom Mason
Sunday 13th February 2022

Jeremiah 17: 5-10; Luke 6:17-26; 1 Cor 15:12-20

One of the many blessings that I love living in the north, is that we are surrounded by many diverse types of trees. The trees offer us a sense of connection with God and all his creation. This connection with nature seems to shift with our hearts and our emotions, bringing our hearts closer to God.

In winter, when its snowy and the view from our windows may be dark, grey, or gloomy, snow- covered trees seem to appear as only oblique shadowy shapes, but when the winter sun shines, and we have those bright clear northern days, crisp and cold, the trees take on a magical appearance, where light reflects and appears to amplify and uplift our senses, the trees act almost like a litmus paper, as indicators to us of life.

These seasonal changes with the trees and this curious connection with our own seasonal emotions that they seem to mimic or reflect how we feel in our own hearts in winter, spring, summer, and fall. If we wish to know the season and what its like outside, we simply need to look up at the trees, this might also even reflect how our own hearts and lives are seasonally shifting too.

Trees reach down and up; they send roots into the ground and trunks and branches towards the light and the sky. They are always grounded and growing, they can be stationary or moving, they stretch, they reach, they seek what gives them life and enrichment – water, soil, and sun.

This morning's scripture from Jerimiah 17:5-10 offers us this wonderful metaphor of a tree. God often uses nature to teach and witness to faith. All of creation is connected in the creator; the love of God is revealed in all that God has infused with life.

So, it should not surprise us that images of trees, shrubs, water, and earth appear throughout our scriptures. These images are of and from God, of Gods relationship with us. When we hold God closer to our heart, when we sense

this presence, we are at peace. We become the people we were created to be, and we live in harmony with others and with all creation.

The Jeremiah text this week sends out a warning, a warning about the human heart, something that cannot be understood, and that our hearts will be searched and will be tested, and that we will also be measured on the day of judgement through our actions and our deeds with others. Just like the tree, we need nourishment and water for our faith to grow, to flourish and to remain strong. Jeremiah illustrates this for as a metaphor, confirming this by the comparison of a shrub in the desert to a tree by the water. Those who rely on the flesh or on those things of man, those who do not receive a spiritual source of nourishment - "whose hearts turn away from the Lord" are cursed with a life that resembles the shrub.

There is no way for the shrub to grow or to thrive, it remains alone in the wilderness without nourishment and life-giving water. It becomes parched. Eventually it will be withered and become passed by. But those who "trust in the Lord" are blessed like the tree – green and perpetually fruit bearing. In this depiction, trusting in the flesh is fruitless, while trusting in the Lord is life-giving.

But what about when it is not? What about the moments, the months even the years when our trust in God does not feel fruitful but leaves us feeling empty, parched or barren like the desert shrub? Are we just not trusting in God enough? John Calvin affirmed that true knowledge of God ultimately consisted of a trust and reverence for God as "*the fountain of every good,*" do we trust this source of spiritual nourishment and necessity?

In the New Testament reading from 1 Cor 15:12-20 - this is a problem in Corinth. Debate and human understanding have taken over, and the fundamental Christian faith belief, that of the resurrection of the dead, is being denied and fearfully and regrettably not trusted.

If there is no resurrection of the dead, there is no resurrection of Christ, with no resurrection of Christ we cannot be saved, our sins may not be forgiven, and we are unable to be received into the presence of God. Our faith simply becomes futile. The Corinthians by this thought process are mis-representing God and denying the hope of our faith in which we live. This denies the

Corinthians their access, their very source of life- giving nourishment. They become like the shrub that Jerimiah describes so vividly. In our Gospel reading this morning from Luke 6:27-38, Jesus preaches the Beatitudes in his sermon on the plain. These teaching seem to be at odds with our normal living expectations and practices.

Jesus's teachings are not easy to comply or obey, they place others ahead of ourselves, if followed they place us on an outward moving pathway of discipleship, of change, where self becomes second, and we shift to think and care for all others first. This shift is motivated by action through Jesus becoming closer in our hearts. These teachings of Jesus become our nourishment, we become like Jeramiah's tree or if not obeyed, like his shrub.

For each reality – poverty, hunger, weeping, hatred – Jesus offers a promise of that which is to come. The poor will reap the kingdom, the hungry will be filled, the ones who weep will laugh, and the ones who are excluded will be filled with joy. There is no indication that the present painful reality is magically lifted away, even for those who are in Jesus's presence and hear his words the very moment he speaks to them; on that level plain, where the Word is for everyone.

The promised gifts of life and joy will come like flowing water to a parched tree, but likely not today. It is this future that Jeremiah points and seems to guide us towards. The green, fruit bearing tree shall be our hope for our future. That tree shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green. Even in darkness and drought, the tree shall grow.

Even when everything around it tries to take away its life, the tree that Jerimiah describes shall not die. In the Lord's care, with Jesus closer to our heart, the tree will live. The future is a difficult place to put our trust. So is the present. And the past just gives us multiple reasons not to trust in the present or the future.

These words from Jesus and Jeremiah remind us that it is not the future itself in which we trust; it is God. We do not trust in ourselves. We trust in the God who blesses us through our troubled present and leads us to the other side - to a future of hope in His Kingdom. In our despair, we hope in that phrase "shall be" (that which is to come) – promised by a God who holds the past,

present and the future - a God who knows intimately the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated, the excluded and the defamed. A God who keeps promises, and who has so much more in store for us than the chronic afflictions that we presently bear.

Yet the promised future also has another side one which we cannot ignore. At the end of the Sermon on the level Plain, Jesus continues to speak of a future – but this time, a future of woe for those who are dependent only on material success, who are full, who are laughing now.

(I should state that the word for poor in Koine Greek (ptoxoi) = poor, miserable, begging, pitiful) - is that of a beggar, the original scripture references someone who is more than just poor. The poor and the hungry know the reality of their situation, they are dependent on God and his mercy. Those with material success, which is no sin, at times may find it more difficult to have total comfort with a dependency on the mercy and grace of God.

Their promised future shall be filled with sorrow and emptiness. It is an uncomfortable, even scathing promise. In Jeremiah those whose hearts turn away from the Lord “shall be like a shrub in the desert” parched and alone in the wilderness. The other side of the blessing is a curse. The other side of promised hope is the reality of lived suffering and despair. For the reality of life, we will inevitably live in both conditions - trusting in God, and trusting in ourselves, Hungry and full, weeping and laughing, hated, and loved. And Jesus reminds us here that there is always another side to what we experience. When we are full, we can be sure that one day we will be empty again, and that the true fullness that endures is from God.

When we are weeping, we can be sure that one day we will laugh and rejoice, and that our joy is from God. For every part of life, there is another angle that God holds before us, this ensures that we do not forget his presence and power infused in everything that we do and through everything we live.

As the trees in changing seasons of our hearts remind us, God’s promise is that there is always another experience and always a reason to hope. It is winter this morning, yet Spring will come.