

Sermon for 3 Before Lent, Year C : Being Rooted

Old Testament: Jeremiah 17.5-10

New Testament: 1 Corinthians 15.12-20

Gospel: Luke 6.17-26

I wonder if the keen gardener amongst you knows what is in common with all the pictures...



Well, I haven't chosen Fig Trees for any particular reasons; although they do hold a special place in scripture. They are the third tree mentioned in genesis (after the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil) and they appear in at least 10 old testament books. In the new testament, a fig tree is cursed by Jesus in Mark's gospel and features in parables in all three synoptic gospels..

Perhaps it's prominent place is due to the fig tree being something of an arboreal wonder; with 850 species spreading across the planet in a wide variety of climates.

It can be found along watercourses such as streams and rivers, in swamps and jungles and it can also survive in semi-arid areas and even deserts.

But the reason I've focused on Fig Trees, and one of the reasons they have probably been so successful, is their extensive root system. In some cases, such as the rubber fig tree in India, the roots are so impressive that they are trained into living bridges. And the Fig Trees in Mpumalanga in South Africa have the deepest roots of any known tree, plunging over 100m deep into the eerie Echo Caves.

So what's so important about roots?

Deep roots allow the tree to wring hydration from dry and rocky ground. In parched lands, roots are able to go deep down, groping around instinctively for water. As gardeners and house builders will both be weary of; pervasive roots are even able to break through rocks, concrete and walls as they spread out further and further; taking advantage of any small crack. And so, deep rooted fig trees in parts of Africa and other dry places, do not have to worry when there are sustained periods of drought; their leaves remain green and they still produce good fruit in their season. Because their roots are well established.

And so we turn to the prophet Jeremiah; writing during the time of exile, when the people have been physically uprooted, writing to people of Israel to remain rooted in God. He says:

⁷ “But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD,
whose confidence is in him.

⁸ They will be like a tree planted by the water
that sends out its roots by the stream.

It does not fear when heat comes;
its leaves are always green.

It has no worries in a year of drought
and never fails to bear fruit.”

Jeremiah is calling for us to be rooted people. Rooted in our faith and in our God. Rooted, so that even when it feels like we are groping along in darkness, through rocky and barren times, we are able to stretch out to the cool life-giving water of God’s love. Because, let’s make this clear, Jeremiah is not saying that those who are rooted in God will have an easy life. It’s clear that both those trusting in mortals in verses 5 and 6 (those trusting in earthly stuff) and those trusting in the Lord, experience drought. The difference is what happens during it!

So I’d like you to hold your picture for a moment and think about how rooted you are in your faith.

And I wonder, how have your roots sustained you during times of drought....

Developing deep roots focuses us on what is important, on what we trust in... Developing deep roots of faith helps us to rely on God and not on human things. Perhaps then, this is why in our reading from the Gospel of Luke, we hear Jesus saying “woe to you who are rich”. Woe to you, to us, who are rich, who are full, who are happy... Woe to us, because our wealth, our happiness and our satisfaction has the power to isolate us from God. God is the God of those who have nothing but God and often we can fall into the trap of thinking there is nothing God needs to provide for us... For those of us living in relative security, the temptation is to keep our roots on the surface...

But when we forget our reliance on God, we turn away from the fountain of the living water.

And so, allowing ourselves to develop those deep roots, is a sign of our trust in God. Just think about those deeply rooted trees; they cannot just move on when things turn stormy – they weather the wind, bending and flexing, but knowing their roots will keep them in place. And even if the tree does snap; deep roots means that often new shoots will spring up from the old stump...

Paul writes in the letter to the Ephesians;

“I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ”

Deep roots keep us grounded and allow us to experience the full extent God’s love for us...

And so I wonder, what is it you need to develop deeper roots...

Perhaps that is a question for you to hold as we travel closer to lent. What is it that you need to help those roots travel deep enough to keep you strong in future storms? Is it to deepen your prayer life, or to develop your love of the bible? Is it for you to spend time counting your blessings, or to grow in awareness of your need of God? Whatever it is, use that to plan how you will spend Lent.

Finally, I think there's one more lesson our image of a tree and its roots can teach us.. Because as well as providing the support structure for our personal faith, being deeply rooted can also apply in the way we live out that faith, as individuals and as a church...

It must be said that rooted-ness is not particularly fashionable in society at the moment... We get bored and resentful and we are constantly encourage to 'get away from it all'. Our hearts grumble and we want to flee... In a consumer society, when something doesn't go our way, we can easily move on to something else; be that in where we live, where we work, who we live with or where we worship. We are tempted to move from place to place, ever looking for the perfect situation... In short, stability isn't very cool...

But trees do not constantly move. They stand firm and tall. Much life passes them by with the changing of the seasons. They see times of plenty, where the sun is warm on their leaves and the flowers grow around them and the birds make their nests in their branches. They seem times of bitter cold, when all around them is bleak, and the nests are empty and the leaves have rotted away on the forest floor. But they remain rooted in their land. Anchored in the soil which provides them with rich, life-giving nutrients.

Stability, rootedness, is one of the three key elements to Benedictine spirituality and it has endured for a reason. Benedict was critical of those we described as gyrovagues; monks who were constantly on the move and he was constantly warning against the low level grumbling born of community life...

Stability meant staying put and pay attention to what God is doing right there, in the place that you are in and with the people that you are with, however annoying they might be!

And so for us too, rootedness means slowing down enough to see God's presence in the world... Not only that, but as we stay stable, stay rooted, we allow ourselves to rely on God and find new ways of solving difficult situation, instead of running away from them. Rootedness means standing still and facing the real issues...

And so I wonder how rooted each of us feels this week..

How roots are we;

In our faith

In this church

And in this community...

To finish, I read a poem by Ann Lewin; Peace Trees.