

## **OLIVE**

**Reading**                      Romans 11.17-24

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not vaunt yourselves over the branches. If you do vaunt yourselves, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity towards those who have fallen, but God's kindness towards you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

### **Talk**

There is a close connection with the Passion story and Olive trees, because Gethsemane was an olive grove. But what I want to do is to think of some of the ways in which olives are associated in less obvious ways. We have just heard a reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, which uses the image of the olive tree to talk about the people of God. Jeremiah says of Israel 'The Lord once called you "a green olive tree, fair with goodly fruit"' - and he is not the only prophet to use that picture of Israel as the Olive Tree of God. But then Paul goes on to talk horticultural nonsense. He says the Gentiles are like a wild olive grafted into the olive tree of Israel. What happens in olive groves is the opposite - that you graft a good olive onto wild olive stock. But Paul is writing theology, not a gardener's handbook, and his point is clear enough. What was outside the fruiting stock has become part of it. But it is good to note a warning which is inherent in what he says. In those early days of the church when Paul was writing, and Jew and Gentile were becoming more and more antagonistic, it was easy for the Christians to think that God had rejected his ancient people, the Jews. But in essence he is saying that there would never have been Christianity without Judaism first, so he warns them not to be contemptuous of their Jewish neighbours. If the old branches could be lopped off to graft in the new, there is no reason why the new cannot be lopped off as well. Sadly there were centuries of anti-Semitism by Christians, and we are only just emerging from those bad times. Our attitudes to Jewish people are going to be coloured by how much we have taken a passage like this into consideration. And it also reminds us that we cannot afford to lose our Jewish roots, like the Old Testament. It is like the story of the spider who built a fine web from the ceiling. When it was finished, he took a step back to admire it, and noticed an

untidy thread reaching up into the darkness. So he ate through it – and the whole web collapsed on the floor. He had severed the line which anchored it to the ceiling. When I arrived in my last parish they were used to having an Epistle, a Gospel, but no Old Testament reading. I changed that as soon as possible. We lose those roots at our peril.

Most olives grown in the Holy Land were made into olive oil, and quite apart from its culinary use, it had religious uses as well. Jesus is accused by the High Priest of being the Messiah, the Christ, and those two words in Hebrew and Greek translate into English as ‘Anointed One’. Anointing was part of the religious rituals of ancient Israel, and it was olive oil which was used. There were three lots of people who were anointed formally. The first were the Kings – and we have already thought today about the fact that Jesus was crucified under the accusation of being King of the Jews. The second were the priests – and again we have touched on how Jesus' sacrifice was the fulfilment of the sacrifices that the High Priest made on the Day of Atonement.

We still use olive oil in religious ceremonies. On Maundy Thursday in most Dioceses, clergy gather for the annual service of the Blessing of the Oils, at which the Bishop sets apart oils for anointing people at Baptism and Confirmation. Priests and Bishops are also anointed at their ordination. The third flask of oil he consecrates is related to the third group who were anointed in the ancient world - the sick. Think of the story of the Good Samaritan. He binds up the injured man and bathes his wounds with olive oil. It was used for healing. Probably these days we just think of olive oil to soften earwax, but actually it is still apparently a possible therapy for hyperlipoproteinemia, whatever that is! In more popular medicine, we know it may well be a factor in lowering cholesterol – the so-called Mediterranean diets and so on. People have written books claiming thirty or forty therapeutic uses for an everyday liquid. In ancient times, it was basic to health care. And one of the ways in which we talk about the cross is that it is a place of healing. It is the place of healing the rift between God and mankind brought about by sin. It is the place of personal healing when we claim the goodness of Christ instead our own sinfulness. One of the songs of the suffering servant in Isaiah, which Christians have always associated with the death of Jesus, says ‘by his wounds you have been healed’. Perhaps you remember the words of the hymn ‘Bread of heaven on thee we feed’. It contains these lines which remind us not only of the healing cross, but of the grafting Paul talked about.

Lord, thy wounds our healing give, to thy cross we look and live:

Jesus, may we ever be grafted, rooted built in thee.