

Trees have had an important place in many, if not most religions. And although from Old Testament time onwards, the Judaeo-Christian tradition has had to guard against pagan ideas about trees, nonetheless trees have become part of parcel of our tradition as well, culminating in the way we talk of the Cross as ‘the Tree’ – the ultimate tree, as it were. We will consider some of the other trees we read about in the Bible, and see what the stories and symbolism they offer add to our understanding of God’s love for us.

THE TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL

Reading

Genesis 3.1-7

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden”?’ The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.” ’ But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Talk

On a day when we are thinking about how God has done something which radically changes the separation between him and us brought about by sin, it is appropriate to go back to that lovely story of the garden. The Garden of Eden is an idyllic existence. And there is only one rule - don’t eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. But as people are so fond of saying, rules are made to be broken, and this one is no exception. Adam and Eve ruin their ideal world because the one limitation on their freedom is too much to cope with. In that, they are very modern. The cry of children - and adults - is ‘Why should I?’ or ‘Why shouldn’t I?’ Modern psychology might dissuade us from the time-honoured answer ‘Because I say so’, but it is precisely the reason that pair in the Garden were to keep off that tree. Scholars have argued about the nature of what they would get from the tree. It can’t have been universal knowledge, as the name of it implied, because clearly they didn’t have that afterwards. There is nothing holy about being ignorant. God’s command later was to love the Lord our God with all our minds as well as our heart and strength. Getting the right perspective on this informs all sorts of things like the relationship between faith and science. Science literally means ‘Knowing’, and the more we know of the world God has made, the more we

know about God. Therefore science is a holy pursuit – although like any pursuit, it can be used rightly and wrongly. Knowledge can heal, and knowledge can destroy. Maybe you know the Indian story of the blind men who encounter an elephant for the first time. The first said it was like a pillar (because he had only felt the elephant's legs). The second said no, it was like a barrel (because he had only felt its belly). The third disagreed with them both and said it was like a rope (because he had felt its tail). The fourth was adamant they were all wrong, It was like a hose (he had felt its trunk) and the last said they were all stupid – it was like a winnowing fan (because he had felt its ear). A Hindu story which has something to offer to us Christians. We only grasp a part of the truth, and yet far too often we think we have got it all. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, of knowledge, says the Old Testament, and we need in humility to offer our knowledge and also our ignorance to him. But knowledge is not in itself wrong. But the problem with knowledge is that once you know something, you can't un-know it. But people sometimes try. Later we will hear part of a medieval poem. There is another medieval book which has remained popular through all the centuries called 'The Cloud of Unknowing' which seeks to bring us close to God, not by knowledge but by love. I will return to that in a moment.

So if the fruit of that mythical tree was not knowledge, could it mean moral judgement? Well, no, because that ought to be there as part of an ideal world anyway. The stories that follow on in the Bible show a singular lack of moral judgement – starting with Cain and Abel. There have been some very interesting debates about the nature of innocence. We say a 10 year old can be responsible for his or her actions, but we say in terms of sex that no-one under 16 is capable for giving consent. Is the story that God originally intended lifelong moral innocence? That doesn't make sense either.

There is a lot to be said for the opinion which suggests that the tree is any old tree, provided by God as an ethical test for his creatures, who would by it acquire firsthand knowledge of good and evil, according to whether he was good, and didn't eat it, or evil, and did. In that sense, we all know about that tree, which comes in all sorts of flavours. We don't need the medieval concept of the inherited sin of Adam - we can do it easily for ourselves. Faced with our tree, we reach out just as they did. That is why the story is so good. We can identify with the hero - or anti-hero- absolutely.

We cannot be reasoned into faith – to that extent knowledge is futile. And yet as we follow the advice of the Cloud of Unknowing and simply love God, we find our knowledge is widened and deepened. The story of today is how in Jesus, the tree which represents disobedience is transformed into obedience by the tree of the cross. It is the story of how the knowledge of God which is hidden, because God is hidden behind the curtain of the Temple, is open to all, because the curtain is torn in two. It leads to Paul being able to say that one day we will know as we are fully

known. And the fruit of that tree which brought the end of innocence and separation from God is replaced by Jesus, the first fruits of the new harvest.