THE TREE OF LIFE

Reading   Revelation 22.1-5

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.

Talk

We started with a mythical tree in the first book of the Bible, and now we turn our thoughts to another mythical tree, this time in the last book of the Bible – the Tree of Life which we heard about just now, in St John's vision of the heavenly Jerusalem. At the beginning of Revelation, in the letter to the church at Ephesus, John writes 'To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.' In the Genesis story we heard earlier, we talked of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In Genesis 2 it also talks of the Tree of Life, and it is not entirely clear if those two trees are one and the same. It seems more likely they are not. It stands for mankind's complete communion with God - the source of all life. When Adam is banished from the garden, he has that communion broken. But here in the vision of John, that communion is restored. That was not entirely new thinking. There were many Jewish thinkers who believed that when the Messiah came, and the new age dawned, the Tree of Life would be central again. For example in the book Ecclesiasticus in the Apocrypha, it says: The knowledge of the Lord's commandments is life-giving discipline, and those who do what is pleasing to him enjoy the fruit of the tree of immortality'. The Rabbis talked of this tree overshadowing the whole of paradise, with 500,000 fragrant perfumes, and the fruits having infinite numbers of different tastes. We heard in the reading how that tree in Paradise has twelve different fruits, one for each month of the year. And its leaves are for the healing of the nations. Again it takes us back to those primitive mythological stories in Genesis – and how the nations were divided after the building of the Tower of Babel. What sinfulness has divided, God's redemption in Jesus has restored. It is good to remember that the new age which Christ brings in is all-encompassing. The *world* is redeemed, not just people. The hope in Christ is not just personal salvation, but the salvation of the whole world. It is *all creation* which groans like a woman in labour, Paul writes, until she finally gives birth to the new age of God's kingdom. There is so much in the New Testament which has language which means the restoration of what was lost. Death turns to life, darkness to light, division of nations into unity of all people.

Jesus is the new Adam whose obedience is the reversal of the first Adam's disobedience. As we sing in the hymn 'a second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.' The word 'rescuer' is an accurate translation of the word we often translate 'Saviour'. And the language of the tree is very much part of that reversal. As we say in one of the Eucharistic prefaces, 'the tree of defeat has become the tree of glory, and where life was lost, there life has been restored.' The tree in the sense of the gallows of execution represents curse – 'anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse' as it says in Deuteronomy 21. Paul talks about that curse in Galatians 3 and in 2 Corinthians, and how Jesus has reversed it. It is a glorious mirror ending of the Biblical record that we start and finish with the same tree, and see how God's grace has led from losing the Tree of Life to regaining it. Paradise Lost to Paradise regained, as Milton phrased it in the titles of his poems.