Reflections on: Divine Nature in Trees – by Hazel 24th November 2020

Opening words: This week, we have a transcript. We are no longer providing video resources every week but may continue to create these important seasons of the year. We have included some pictures/ resources to help you in your meditation.

If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us' we meditate at 7.30pm on Wednesday in the physical space of the meditation room at Wisdom Centre. The tradition we meditate in is Centering Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centering Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: Eternal God, through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, stability, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Introduction:



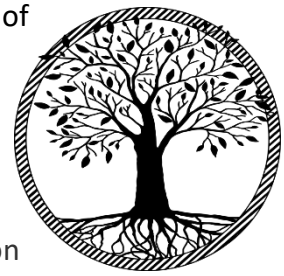
Believe an expert: you will find something far greater in the woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you that which you cannot learn from the masters.
St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), abbot and author [1]

This coming week from 28th November to 6th December is National Tree Week[2]. This is the UK's largest annual tree celebration, marking the start of the winter tree planting season (November to March). Although the collective events that normally mark this week, cannot take place this year, that does not prevent us from taking time to notice what it is that Trees might teach us. It is a special time of year as deciduous trees shed their leaves in their transition into winter. Also this week, we are at the end the Christian liturgical year with Sunday 22nd November marking the Festival of Christ the King, and Sunday 29th November the beginning of Advent. Our faith calendar and practices might offer other opportunities to notice synergies with nature as dates were often aligned in some way to the rhythms of the seasons or lunar calendar. Today though, I will focus on noticing the Divine in the fascinating life and rhythms of trees.

Getting to know the Creator: There are over 250 references to trees in the Bible, in a whole range of contexts. Notably in Genesis, they are acknowledged as 'good' by God as creator. In October this year, David Coles led a quiet day at the Wisdom Centre on the subject of 'Divine Nature in the Celtic Tradition'. He quoted from Columbanus (7th Century) who said, "Get to know the creation if you want to get to know the Creator." David also explained how Jesus taught us to meditate on creation[3] – for example, in Luke Jesus urges his disciples to 'consider' the ravens in the air and the lilies of the fields. The original word for 'consider' meant to pay intense attention to, not to just glance at.

God writes the gospel not in the Bible alone, but on trees and flowers and clouds and stars.
Martin Luther [1]

The trees of knowledge, death and life: Much is written by mystics on the symbolism of the tree of life, the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the tree of death. Our relationship with trees and with nature as a whole, seems inextricable from such psycho-spiritual understanding. For example, Paul Maiteny[4] explores what he describes as 'ancestral warnings of ecosystemic holocaust', as captured in the symbolism of trees of knowledge, death and life. He describes two contradicting instincts - one towards self-interest, the other submitting to dependency on ecosystems, and how Jewish and Christian mystics offer 'clues to the psycho-spiritual evolution necessary for our species to discern our 'membership role' within the ecosystem, and to align our lives accordingly'.



> *Then God said, 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground - everything that has the breath of life in it - I give every green plant for food.'* Genesis 1:29-30

In the above Bible verse, how do we interpret: 'They will be yours'? Maiteny suggests that we have a choice as to whether we seek to dominate, exploit and control nature for our gratitude in a state of dissonance, or to notice it with gratitude and yield to its laws and rhythms in a state of harmony, even if those laws require us to let go of entitlement and expectations; this, he says, is the choice between the Tree of Life and the Tree of Death. We have a capacity to develop deep and sacred connections with nature, on the path to Life.

Forest Church: David Cole runs a Forest Church[5] in the New Forest and this incorporates a short reflection followed by a time walking in nature, simply noticing contemplatively, and then returning to share any insights. (Currently it is on Zoom, and the weekly reflection is posted on his website. There is also a link to a TV documentary[6] that gives a taste of such services as well as other ways in which people come to find spirituality among trees.) A recent reflection was on the process of abscission and 'letting go' of leaves. The following poem by John Moffitt[7] seems to take us deeper into this practice.

To look at any thing,
If you would know that thing,
You must look at it long:
To look at this green and say,
I have seen spring in these
Woods will not do–you must
Be the thing you see:
You must be the dark snakes of
Stems and ferny plumes of leaves,
You must enter in
To the small silences between
The leaves,
You must take your time
And touch the very peace
They issue from.



Forest fascinations: Science can support our explorations and add joy and excitement to the relationships we develop with nature. Peter Wohlleben's book, 'The Hidden Life of Trees[8] offers amazing insights into the intelligence and sophistication of trees. He describes their communication via vast fungal networks, insects and chemical emissions. They have 'a sense of time' and 'they can count', he says. It is not just temperature that dictates when they shed leaves or sprout new ones; they respond to the number of daylight hours. Beeches for example, don't start growing until it is light for a least thirteen hours a day. That in itself is astounding because to do this, trees must have some kind of 'ability to see', even when the leaves are not open to sunlight. It seems that a combination of factors is at play. They are also temperature

dependent and climate change is impacting them. They can 'get in a muddle' when it is warm in the autumn and buds come out early. 'They have to suffer the consequences when delayed frosts finally arrive. The buds for next spring are now lost and costly replacements must be grown. If a tree isn't careful, it will deplete its energy supplies and be less prepared for the coming season.' They also need a sense of time for procreation. If their seeds fall to the ground in the autumn, they mustn't sprout right away. If they do, the delicate shoots won't have time to get woody, so they will freeze. Wohlleben observes that when the weather is cold, there is very little food for animals such as deer, so seeds might get eaten. If they sprout in spring it is safer. Seeds don't have a sophisticated counting mechanism like the one used to trigger leaf growth and so for some seeds, such as beechnuts and acorns, it works well when squirrels and jays bury them an inch or so deep in the soil. There, it doesn't warm up until true spring arrives.

Personal observations and reflections: During lockdown I have been grateful for time spent in woodland, and getting to know a large oak tree with a girth of almost 19 feet, suggesting an age of around 450 years. In leaning against the curved indentations its trunk, it feels so solid and holding, as well as providing protection from rain and wind under enormous boughs. I marvel at the lichen on its bark. These small grey-green growths are a symbiotic combination of fungi and algae. Wohlleben tells me they find substrate in the bark, 'growing at snail's pace and can survive to hundreds of years old, in tune with the slow rhythms of life in ancient forests'[5]. In the woodland, there is such beauty in seasonal rhythms. Simply to be 'present 'to this is a joy. In spring, seedlings of beech trees emerge with their rounded cotyledons, whilst luminous green canopies above thicken. In autumn, a regal bed of golden leaves provides beauty in sound as feet swish through their crisp depths, and cattle find comfort lying on this 'mattress' sheltering between trees. Simply to listen to the wind blowing loudly or gently through the branches is a joy; to watch the final leaves sway, twist and dip in their gentle descent to the ground that they have been watching over and shading through the summer's heat. Trees hold such stories, surviving adversity through flood, drought, climate disruption, pollution. Yet still, in their majestic height, they seem to continue to offer tenderness and love to all who connect with their shared experience of being graced with a season ticket to life on this beautiful earth.

In this deep experience of the Divine in trees, and in the symbolism of the 'Tree of Life', the 'Tree of Death', the 'Tree of Knowledge of good and evil', I feel humility and immense gratitude as well as helplessness, grief and a sense of hypocrisy as I become more aware of my part in a changing climate. In reconnecting to the trees, I learn something of my own ancestral roots within my DNA; something that education had not taught me; something that had escaped my human experience in this culture. It seems that unless we can begin to consciously reconnect to nature, we cannot return to our inherent knowledge of our right place in the universe, letting go from the grips of fear and material needs. If I let go, might I feel held as I fall?

The Sacrament of Letting Go by Macrina Wiederkehr © [9]

Slowly she celebrated the sacrament of
letting go.
First she surrendered her green,
then the orange, yellow, and red.
finally she let go of her own brown.
Shedding her last leaf
she stood empty and silent, stripped bare.
Leaning against the winter sky,
she began her vigil of trust.
Shedding her last leaf,
she watched it journey to the ground.
She stood in silence
wearing the colors of emptiness,
her branches wondering,
How do you give shade with so much gone?

And then, the sacrament of waiting began.
The sunrise and the sunset watched
with tenderness.
Clothing her with silhouettes
that kept her hope alive.
They helped her to understand that
her vulnerability,
her dependence and need,
her emptiness, her readiness to receive,
were giving her a new kind of Beauty.
Every morning and
every evening
they stood in silence,
and celebrated together
the sacrament of waiting.





God is the friend of silence.
See how nature - trees, flowers, grass- grows in silence;
see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence...
We need silence to be able to touch souls.
Mother Teresa(1)

Beginning Meditation: Before beginning our meditation, you may wish to adjust your posture, paying particular attention to the energy in your body and the rhythm of your breath, taking a calming deep breath in through your nose, and a slow breath out, letting go fully. Then repeat this a few times. If you have a sacred word you might notice its rhythm, and perhaps how your word is in time with the breath.

Bell Sounds…25-minute meditations begins…Count down timer starts (this may be your own watch or meditation timer app)

Bell Sounds…Meditation ends

An Apache Blessing (1)

May the sun bring you new energy by day,
may the moon softly restore you by night,
may the rain wash away your worries,
may the breeze blow new strength into your being,
may you walk gently through the world and
know it's beauty all the days of your life.



Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen.**

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon.

Resources:

(1) From World Healing Prayers: http://www.worldhealingprayers.com http://www.worldhealingprayers.com/4.html
(2) The Tree Council (2020). National Tree Week
(3) David Cole–Guided Meditations https://insighttimer.com/davidcole Insight timer
(4) Maiteny, P. (2015) 'Trees of knowledge, death and possible life: ancestral warnings of ecosystemic holocaust, its psycho-spiritual causes, and clues to resolution'
(5) David Cole, Waymark Minstries – Forest Church – Abcission. http://www.waymarkministries.com/forest-church.html
(6) BBC2 TV documentary 'Stories of Us' showing New Forest Forest Church
(7) John Moffitt in Macrina Wiederkehr (2017). When Spring Comes to the Woods
(8) Wohlleben, P. (2016). 'The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World'. London: William Collins.
(9) Wiederkehr, M. (1991). 'Seasons of Your Heart: Prayers and Reflections'. Bravo Limited.

Pictures – Tree of Life: Pixabay.com; others, by the author



Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.