

ENCOURAGEMENT

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TREES

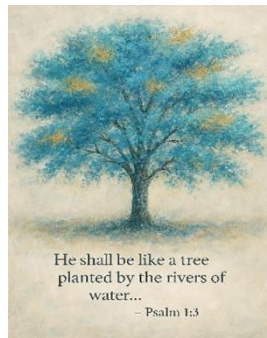
You may find this a strange topic to choose for this September's Encouragement. You may think that it is because we are soon entering 'autumn the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness' (John Keats). You may think it is because our trees and plants have been somewhat confused by our very hot weather and I, as many others, have noticed how leaves on the trees started to fall early, too early, as well as looking wilted. In part, this may be true. Yet I chose this topic for the simple reason and unapologetically, that from childhood I have loved trees. I love the look of them. I loved climbing them and I enjoyed their shade and fruitfulness. But there is also another path to follow. Trees feature all the way through the Old and New Testament and feature in many teachings.

If you asked people what tree they like 'Christmas tree' would probably run quite high. While in Europe we cut them down for the celebration of the Nativity in many countries they are adorned where they were planted. Each country has a tree that is typical of the area and climate, so for example palm tree in hotter climates and oak tree in temperate, and fir tree where snow is often a familiar thing, though each grow in many climates and adapt.

In fact, the word "tree" is mentioned 257 times throughout the whole Bible. 213 of those times are in the Old Testament alone! With the exception of God and people, trees are the most mentioned living creature in the Bible. We can go no further that to quote Isaiah to find the range of trees mentioned 'Isaiah 41:19: "I will put in the desert the Cedar and the Acacia, the Myrtle and the Olive. I will set Junipers in the wasteland, the Fir and the Cypress together." Just as God will supply trees that signal water sources and provide shade in the desert, God will abundantly bless God's people.'

At the very start of the Old Testament in Genesis not

only do we have mention of the tempting apple tree, but we have both the tree of knowledge and the tree of life. Taking from the tree of the knowledge caused Adam and Eve to be evicted from Paradise. The 'tree of life' was guarded by an angel from thence on. It is a matter of concern that the tree of life, of such significance, may today have been breached with a lack of respect for all living things. There are many interpretations of the significance of the tree of life but crucially it represents LIFE and eternal life. It is mentioned at the start of the bible and in Revelation, the last book.



Throughout the Bible trees are mentioned as a form of both beauty and Gods design to help man, but also as a means of teaching and contact. Abraham stops for a while near the great tree, Terebinth of Moreh at Shechem. This is his first stop on his great journey towards the place God wants him, and to commemorate this he sets up an altar – just like he would go on to do at Mamre.

Abraham pitches his tent under the great Oak tree of Mamre and there receives his three visitors who tell him that 'Sarai', later Sarah will have a child even in her old age. Abraham thus becomes the Father of a Spiritual family. Noah is spared the flood by building an ark from many trees and is spared for his obedience.

The Old Testament mentions the cedar trees of Lebanon many times. A cedar can grow to over 100 feet tall and live for well over 100 years. They are mentioned also in Psalms "*The righteous shall flourish like a Palm tree. He shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon.*" (Psalm 92:12). And again, in the Song of Songs. In other passages, the maiden compares her lover's countenance to a cedar tree (in the Song of Solomon 5:15). In 1 Kings 19:1–9, we read about the prophet Elijah running from the evil Queen

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"A tree is known by its fruit, a man by his deeds. A good deed is never lost; he who sows courtesy reaps friendship, and he who plants kindness gathers love."

Saint Basil

Jezebel and finding rest under a Broom tree. As he slept, an angel of the Lord came to him and provided food and water to strengthen him for his journey to Mount Horeb to meet Elisha. There is no shortage of reference to trees in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament Jesus himself uses the comparison of trees to sometimes illustrate His point. He also uses them to teach a truth...

Jesus uses many ways to describe the Kingdom of Heaven and one which is quite graphic is the one which involves trees. He compares it to a mustard tree. Sometimes this tree looks more like a bush but grows very fast. He says *"The kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."* (Matthew 13:31-32). Perhaps best known is the tree that Zacchaeus hid in so that he could see Jesus. It is either a Sycamore tree, (though often thought of as a type of Fig tree?), but there is no hiding from Jesus, and he called him to come down and invited himself to dinner with him.

The Fig tree however is among the most commonly referred to tree. Jesus uses it twice in different contexts and one of them with slight disapproval. "Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it. In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" (Mark 11:20-21) Jesus must have been hungry...

Then, He told this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So, he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'" (Luke 13:6-9). This time it was a reminder to tend to what has been planted in our heart. There are also references to trees by St. Paul in his letter to

the Romans. He reminds the Gentiles that they have been grafted on to 'the tree' of Judaism as a wild olive but share the sap of the original olive root...How can we end without reference indeed to the Olive trees that are so plentiful in the Holy Land, as they were in the time of Jesus. Jesus loved to pray in the Mount of Olives, and it was to that garden of Gethsemane that He went before the crucifixion. We cannot forget either that Jesus died on the wood of a tree.

Trees are also vital today as a source of oxygen and essential for the planet. Where would we be without paper? They enhance our everyday existence and bring beauty to our lives. The 'tree of life' is of course Jesus, and we should shelter in Him and find the shade and succour we need. So next time it is hot, and you welcome the shade of a tree remember who made them.

Halina Holman ©

St. Pope John Paul II

"The aesthetic value of creation cannot be overlooked. Our very contact with nature has a deep restorative power; contemplation of its magnificence imparts peace and serenity. The Bible speaks again and again of the goodness and beauty of creation, which is called to glorify God." **Rome 1990**

Without trees

Without trees, there is no shade.
Without trees, no icons are made.
Without trees, no barbecue for heat.
Without trees, there is no fruit to eat.
Without trees, there is no home for birds.
Without trees, no paper for these words...

Amphilochios of Patmos



Feast Days in September

3rd St. Pope Gregory the Great

5th St. Teresa of Kolkata (Mother Teresa)

7th Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

8th Birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary

12th The Holy Name of Mary 13th St. John Chrysostom

14th Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

15th Our Lady of Sorrows 17th St. Hildegard of Bingen

20th St. Andrew Kim Taegon & Companions

21st Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

23rd St. Pius of Pietrelcina (Padre Pio)

24th Our Lady of Walsingham

26th Sts. Cosmas & Damian 27th St. Vincent de Paul

28th Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

29th Sts. Michael, Gabriel & Raphael, Archangels

30th St. Jerome