



From a service led by the Sustainability group on 13th August 2023

Readings: Matthew 14: 22-33; Genesis 2:8-9; Revelation 22:1-5

Revd David Tatem: a reflection

Creative and ever creating God, open our ears, eyes, hearts and minds to be touched by the wonder of all that you do and find wisdom and hope all around us, in each other and in the world which is your gift to us. Amen

The Tree of Life appears in the book of Genesis almost a bystander to the events that take place in the Garden of Eden. Is it supposed to be one tree or several? And reappears at the end of the Bible in the book of Revelation and now there are many for they stand on both sides of the river of life that flows through the centre of the city of New Jerusalem and plays a crucial role with its year round fruit cropping every month and its leaves that are described as being for the healing of the nations – which is a most intriguing sentence.

It is a most potent symbol and artists have portrayed it down through the centuries. It's a symbol of hope, of fertility, of promise, and in Revelation of promise finally fulfilled.

Look at our image here on the screen and the eye is perhaps mostly drawn to the canopy of branches spreading outwards full of colour and variety and richness that Revelation that describes.

But look further down. Like a mirror of the canopy are the roots which also spread out in all directions, they provide stability and bring nutrients and water to the tree so that it can grow, they feed its health and in that image must carry water from the River of Life into the Tree of Life. So giving a new deeper dimension.



But wait, there's more, actually a lot now that we can add from our own experience and explorations and growth of understanding because as more has been learned about trees and root systems so more has been learnt about the environment in which those roots grow and what else is going on, hidden from view.

In woodlands and forests and all around us there are networks, networks of fungus or to use a less off-putting term mycelial networks that connect all the trees together sharing nutrient between one tree and another and sending messages too, across what has come to be called the 'Wood Wide Web'. When one tree is attacked by a pest, warnings can be sent to the others so that they can prepare to defend themselves and assistance can be sent in return all by this hidden network. A tree that is suffering because of lack of water or other nutrient can also be sent help through this network. We are learning that there is so much more going on literally, below the surface, under our very noses than we ever imagined.

But there is yet even more, for the subtle hidden networks aren't just confined to woodlands and forests but are all around us and have been for millions of years playing creative roles in the development of life itself. Lichens and slime moulds and fungi, spores, algae and bacteria have a most complex and interconnected set of relationships and history that is still revealing itself. The study of the partnership between fungi and algae gave rise to the term symbiosis, the mutually beneficial relationship between two different organisms, or people or groups, living in close proximity to one another. And then there are Lichens that we are so used to seeing on tree trunks and walls with very different colours and patterns have a most amazing history within this complex story of the development of life, the earliest fossils of lichens are 400 million years old with at least 20,00 different varieties capable of a whole range of different actions and they are not one single organism but a symbiotic partnership of at least fungi and algae and other things too that is still being understood, each one a dynamic system and all part of this intricate network. Somewhere 6 and 8 percent of the world's surface is covered in Lichen.

But this is not a lecture in biology, something which I am totally unqualified to give, I am simply benefiting from the symbiotic relationship between scientists, authors and publishers and if you are looking for some holiday or post holiday reading, I can do no better than to recommend the book by Merlin Sheldrake entitled 'Entangled life', a most fascinating book which is primarily about fungi and their networks and if any planned holiday you may have involves truffle hunting, then you definitely need to read it along perhaps, with a beautifully illustrated book by another author, Richard Phillips simply called Mushrooms.

But let us return to the Bible in which the Tree of Life appears just twice but what we read about it in the book of Revelation, compared with its brief appearance in Genesis is surely intended to hint at a something which undergirds everything, its more than a back story its suggests a rich and

complex backdrop to life itself that has been active and growing from the very beginning and from time to time makes its presence felt in the story running through the Bible from beginning to fulfilment and opens a window onto God's deeply and wonderfully creative entanglement with the reality of which we are also an entangled part.

Mystics have sensed and expressed this from very early times. The writer of psalm 104 speaks of God setting the earth on its foundations, perhaps that writer is connecting into the depths of that too, the psalm goes on to encompass not just life but things that are essential to life.

You set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken.
You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,
You cause the grass to grow for the cattle
and plants for people to cultivate,
to bring forth food from the earth
and wine to gladden the human heart,
oil to make the face shine
and bread to strengthen the human heart.
The trees of the field[f] are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has its home in the fir trees.
The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for the conies.

Here is someone who has spent time looking around and thinking and finding connection with the world in which they live. If only, we might say, they had had a microscope....

Then there are the opening lines of John's gospel, again drawing on deep interconnectedness. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life. And perhaps Paul in offering his organic image of the interdependence of the Body of Christ is also drawing on an innate sense of this deep interconnectedness and sees it taking human experience to a new and deeper level of understanding and giving it the kind of ultimate theological significance that we find in Revelation. A theological significance that does not detach human existence from nature and our responsibility for it but instead embeds us ever more deeply in it.

If even fungi and algae can and do act cooperatively, symbiotically, together then how much more does that speak to us of our need to cooperate for the benefit of the whole creation but it also encourages us to believe that it is possible and that the obstacles to it can be overcome because the principle of it is embedded in God's reality.

I was given some dried slime mould for my birthday. I have yet to activate it and then I will be able to put it in a maze and I will be able to watch a slime mould work out how to find its way through the maze. So if a slime mould can do that kind of thing ...

Lets end where we began this morning with that story of Jesus walking on the water. Do we see Jesus somehow magically ignoring the laws of nature, rising above them or does it represent Jesus being in a state of perfect balance with the environment and when Peter tries to follow Jesus example but fails is not the important thing that despite his failure the story tells us that, for a while he succeeds with all that that promises for the future. So hidden within what might seem to be a message about failure and inadequacy there is actually a message about the possibility of humans living in balance with nature.

And that often confusing story of Revelation is one of the ultimate success of that partnership, that symbiosis between God and humanity? The whole of Revelation is after all a story of encouragement, apocalyptic literature is written as encouragement for people going through difficult times and it is surely encouragement that we need to strengthen our determination, that all the small things that are done in harmony with the deep intricacy of God's creation will succeed and then, too, we will eventually also discover, through lived experience, the full extent and meaning of those words that the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

Amen