

Season of Creation: Hearing the voice of earth as a voice of God Yours Treely: On attending to (your neighbourhood) trees

*Magpie, magpie, dive on me,
Swoop down from your holy tree;
As I pass the flower bed
Stick your beak into my head.
Magpie, magpie, make a hole,
Through my head into my soul:
As I pass beneath the sun
Bring my troubled head undone.
Magpie, magpie it is spring
Is my soul a happy thing?
As I pass around the tree
Make a hole so you can see.*

Michael Leunig



Tonight at Benedictus we're commencing a new series to mark what is being called *the Season of Creation*. A season in which, in our worship and preaching we recognize our profound interdependence with the rest of the created order and give thanks for the gifts of creation; when we confess our crimes against creation and recommit to our God-given vocation to be stewards of this wonderful world, and when we are invited to hear the voice of earth as a voice of God.

The idea of celebrating this season arose in the Lutheran church of Adelaide in 2000 and has since been adopted all over the world, including by Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. It commences this weekend with the *World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation* and concludes on October 4 with the *Feast of St Francis of Assisi*. It's a great initiative and I'm glad we're involved.

Unlike the timing of most of the liturgical seasons (which align better with the northern hemisphere), this season works really well in Australia, and particularly in a place like Canberra where we're just starting to venture outside again; where the coming of spring is so anticipated and so welcome (despite diving 'maggies' and wild westerly winds!).

The connection with Francis is poignant too. As you probably know, he had a real heart for creation. Centuries ago, he saw what most of us are only just

beginning to see – that we’re all in this together – people, plants, animals, the earth, the elements... we’re all related. He referred lovingly to Brother Sun and Sister Moon, to Brothers Wind and Air and Sister Water. He communicated with creation, and creation communicated to him.

According to one legend, Francis once called out to an almond tree in mid-winter, ‘Sister, speak to me of God!’ and at once the tree burst into bloom.

It’s a lovely story and it brings me to what I want to encourage you to do in this sermon, which is to get to know your neighbours. Not your human neighbours in this instance, though that’s a good thing, but your *leafy* neighbours – the trees.

One of the suggested ways of approaching this season is to focus on different features of creation and on different themes. This week it’s forests, and the theme is attending; next week it’s land, then wilderness, and finally water.

So tonight, forests, or in this case, local trees.

You know in almost every culture trees have a special place; but in ours they have often been overlooked. Thank God this is changing. Thank God for places like our wonderful arboretum, where trees are front and centre.

In many cultures the tree is a symbol of wisdom. The symbol of Benedictus is a tree – with its roots going deep into the soil and its branches stretching to heaven. It’s a beautiful symbol of cross and resurrection and of integration and wholeness.

Trees are also a powerful presence. The trees are there, all the time, holding the soil, breathing and generating the air *we* breathe. Without trees we suffocate... and we die.

There are essential, and yet so often they go unacknowledged – mere background to our ‘important’ and busy lives.

Trees and Scripture

As I’ve thought about it, I’ve ben struck by what a significant place trees have in the Christian story. The ‘tree of life’ is first described in chapter 2 of Genesis, planted in the midst of the Garden next to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – planted by God. Where would we be without those trees??

The tree of life is mentioned again in the last book of the bible, the Book of Revelation – planted on either side of the river of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month, *and the leaves of the tree for the healing of the nations.*

In the centre of the story, we read of Jesus (a *shoot* from the *stump* of Jesse) hanging on a tree.

In Isaiah, the trees of the field bear witness to the liberation of the people and clap their hands with delight!

There are the famous cedars of Lebanon, the tree of Psalm 1, and the wild olive of Paul's letter to the Romans; there's the fig tree and Amos's almond tree, and on it goes.

Trees and communication

The tree as a symbol communicates something of what it means to be a disciple; they invite us to think about *seeding* and *greening* and *fruiting* and *shading* and *supporting* for the commonweal

They embody virtues critical to the life of faith – stability and deep rootedness, patience, endurance, generosity, hospitality and contentment...

'The trees have it par excellence, Aussie poet Noel Davis wrote, 'all their life hanging about being.'

Most of us spend most of our lives doing exactly the opposite – trying to be *someone* else, *somewhere* else – we can learn a lot from these non-anxious neighbours.

Trees are a great example in the spiritual life, and they are also a great help. I mean who of us hasn't found it easier to slow down and meditate or pray in the presence of a tree??

And, think of Zacchaeus, the little taxman we read about in Luke 19. Were it not for the help of a sycamore tree he would've missed out Jesus passing through his village. Up in that tree, he was not only *seen* by Jesus, but also *addressed* and *called* and *welcomed* into the family of God (of things).

Trees communicate with each other we're discovering (if you've read books like *The Secret Life of Trees* or *The Songs of Trees* you'll know much more about this than me). And, I wonder, do they also communicate with us... or try, at least?

This has become a live issue for me. Recently, as many of you know, Sarah and I went on a *Spirit Journey* in central Australia. One of the things that happened for me out there was that I became entranced by the trees – the gnarly river gums, the smooth white ghost gums, the bloodwoods and corkwoods and mulgas; they took my breath away. I was in awe of where they grew and how they survived!

On a number of occasions I felt as if I was actually being drawn to go up and greet a tree, to thank it for its company. Occasional, I would put my ear up against its trunk... and I could hear the sap rising. (It was communication of sorts.)

But do they speak even more personally than that, more directly? And, if so, could this be a voice of God?

That might sound crazy and heretical (just the sort of thing you'd hear at Benedictus!!), but then I think of Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3)... a story so fundamental to our faith – God speaking from out of a tree (or scraggy bush actually – which just goes to show that this need not be a grand thing).

Some of you have heard of *dadirri*, an indigenous contemplative practice of stillness and attention, of deep listening and awareness. What might happen if we practised *dadirri*, if we took the time to really listen to our tree neighbours?

Well, this is where I get even more vague. I've only just begun my journey with this and there's much I do not know. I've started by just trying to be more aware of the trees I pass every day on my walk to Uni. I make it a practice to touch and greet some of them as I walk by – to notice something new each day.

I don't know where it's going, but I sense it is having an affect. I am more open; I feel more connected and in tune with the world. I am more responsive and that has to be a good thing.

Attending to trees

So, let me encourage you to *attend to* the trees of your neighbourhood.

How do you do it? Well, maybe just go for walk to begin. I discovered the word '*werifesteria*' recently; it means 'to walk longingly in the forest in search

of mystery'. There's an idea. Go for a wonder in the forest of your neighbourhood; let a tree introduce itself and then spend some time with it. Maybe draw or paint or photograph it, lean against it, put your ear to its trunk, smell it, put your arms around it.

Love is an energy that gives life – let the tree give you life and share some back....

Breathe in its presence – breathe in its rich clean oxygen and offer your breath back... that's how it works, we breathe for each other.

Talk to it (when no one's looking!!).

Let it talk to you – tell you its story – the marks and scars will speak even if you hear no voice. Be patient... don't expect everything at once – trees are naturally reserved. They're not in a hurry. We need to spend time, to go back again and again, to prove we're interested and that we care, and are worthy of confiding in. It's about respect for the otherness of the other, as well as our connection.

Maybe you could also plant a tree (if not on your patch then somewhere else); God knows we've contributed to their felling.

And let's also just *remember* trees. I imagine we all already have trees that are special – trees from our childhood, trees in our yards that have born long witness to our lives. Let's talk about them; let's help each other become more aware *and grateful* for these fellow creatures with whom we share this life.

On the whole, as Pope Francis has written, we do not have a great relationship with creation. We can do better and *we need to*. Here's one small act of reconciliation – make friends with a tree.

*'What was it you said?'; Anthony de Mello wrote,
 'You've heard dozens of birds sing and seen hundreds of trees?
 If you look at a tree and see a tree, you have not really seen the tree.
 When you look at the tree and see a miracle – then, at last, you have seen!'*

And, may it be so... for all of us.

Neil Millar (Creation 1, September 2017)