**SOUTHWELL MINSTER**

**Housegroups 2018-2019**

**LISTENING TO THE LEAVES**

**Themes for group study**

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Listening to the Leaves

Introduction to the study themes

*“The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the East” Genesis 2:8*

It is possible to cast the whole biblical narrative as a story concerning gardens. It begins in Eden and ends with the garden city of Revelation 22:2 – a paradise where the tree of life yields its twelve kinds of fruit each month: and the leaves of its tree are for the healing of the nations. In between is another garden; a place of toil and sweat, of darkness and betrayal, but also a place of unexpected recognition and mysterious appearances.

In our house group meetings this autumn and winter, we shall explore themes associated with gardens, trees and leaves. We shall reflect on their symbolism and consider how it bears on our understanding of God and the natural world, on ourselves and on what makes for human flourishing, on healing and reconciliation, and on ethics and ecology.

We have a special gift at Southwell in the building itself, and in particular the leaves of the Chapter House, which we shall refer to as they illustrate biblical themes.

Using the materials

The materials presented here we have called themes, *not* sessions. There is no expectation that groups will have to complete their study of the material for one theme in one meeting. Some will work out that way, but some offer a lot of things to consider, and it is important for groups to go at the pace they find comfortable and helpful.

There is certainly enough material for every group to find useful stimulus for a series of autumn meetings, but for groups that want to take a more leisurely approach to working with the themes, sessions can run on after Christmas. Lent does not begin until 9th March, which should give everyone time to explore these themes fully.

We hope that in our meeting together we will be listening for the voice of God, and we want to give an opportunity for groups to share what they have learnt which might be significant for our common life. To that end we are planning a “Listening to the Leaves Day” in the early part of next year. More information about it will appear in due course.

Brief liturgies for opening and closing worship have been provided, and there are other occasions for silence or common prayer. Some of this material will benefit from being read between meetings of the group, and there are also suggestions for activities which your members may like to take advantage of. All of this is designed to help each of us enter more fully into the exploration of the themes, in the hope that through it we may grow in grace and wisdom, be blessed in flourishing as a community, and know how we are to live and share that blessing.

*Sweet are the uses of adversity;   
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,   
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;   
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,   
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,   
Sermons in stones, and good in everything*.

Shakespeare ‘***As You Like It***’ Act 2 scene 1

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Opening and closing liturgies for each meeting

Opening Prayers

*The group may like to light a candle at the start of their meeting.*

Leader: We meet in the name of God  
**All: Who is our maker, our hope, and our strength.**

Leader: We meet in the name of Jesus Christ  
**All: Who is our friend, our lover, and our redeemer.**

Leader: We meet in the name of the Spirit  
**All: Who is our breath, our life and our destiny.**

God the Three in One,   
who holds all creation in your tender embrace,   
and who has known us from before we were born,  
Bless our life together, and the time we spend here.   
Draw us to attend more closely to the wonders of your creation,   
and the ways in which you call us to justice and peace   
through listening to the world and its cries of pain.   
Open our eyes to see the infinite in the familiar,   
the challenging in the commonplace,  
and the individual in the crowd,  
and give us the will to follow our Saviour Jesus Christ. **Amen**.

*We say the Lord’s Prayer together.*

Closing Prayers

Leader: In peace we listen for the Lord  
**All: We listen for God’s still small voice**

*The group keeps a moment or two of silent reflection on the content of their meeting*

O God, you are the light of the minds that know you,  
the life of the souls that love you,   
and the strength of the wills that serve you:  
Help us so to know you that we may truly love you,  
and so to love you that we may fully serve you.  
whom to serve is perfect freedom;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**.  
*St Augustine of Hippo (354-430)*

*We say the Grace to finish our time together, and the candle is extinguished.*

**Theme One**: Listening to The Leaves

Just Look!

A former guide at York knew a great deal about the magnificent Minster and its history but she would begin saying nothing but *Just Look!* Our cathedrals are gifts to us that can enable and inspire worship. Without a word being said, they are sermons in stone.

Lincoln cathedral offers a helpful starting point.

With its rebuilding after the earthquake of 1185 came a radically new style of architecture that came to be known as Gothic. Whilst pioneered in France, in England it was developed in a particular way. Cathedrals were not as tall but their interiors became more elaborate and ornate. New techniques such as ribbed vaulting, flying buttresses and pointed arches enabled larger windows and thus more light, signifying a belief that ‘God is light and in him is no darkness at all’.

*They made the grey stone*

*Blossom, setting it on a branch*

*of the mind; airy cathedrals*

*Grew, trembling at the tip*

*of their breathing: delicate palaces*

*Hung motionless in the gold,*

*Unbelievable sunrise....*

R.S. Thomas. Art History

Greater attention was given to interior design and decoration. Religious art and sculpture became more important, and this included natural foliage, symbolic creatures, human and angelic figures. The wonderful angelic quire at Lincoln illustrates heaven and earth meeting in stone and in praise of God. Thus, in the early morning as light streamed through the choir the Laudate psalms 146-150 would be sung and the building would signify a living church coming into bloom with a Benedicite of praise being offered.

Saying the Benedicite – a Canticle of Creation

*The group may like to say the Benedicite responsively at this point:*

O all ye Works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

2    O ye Angels of the Lord, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

3    O ye Heavens, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

4    O ye Waters that be above the Firmament, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

5    O all ye Powers of the Lord, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

6    O ye Sun and Moon, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

7    O ye Stars of Heaven, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

8    O ye Showers and Dew, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

9    O ye Winds of God, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

10  O ye Fire and Heat, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

11  O ye Winter and Summer, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

12  O ye Dews and Frosts, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

13  O ye Frost and Cold, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

14  O ye Ice and Snow, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

15  O ye Nights and Days, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

16  O ye Light and Darkness, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

17  O ye Lightnings and Clouds, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

18  O let the Earth bless the Lord **:  
yea, let it praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

19  O ye Mountains and Hills, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

20  O all ye Green Things upon the Earth, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

21  O ye Wells, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

22  O ye Seas and Floods, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

23  O ye Whales, and all that move in the Waters, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

24  O all ye Fowls of the Air, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

25  O all ye Beasts and Cattle, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

26  O ye Children of Men, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

27  O let Israel bless the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

28  O ye Priests of the Lord, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

29  O ye Servants of the Lord, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

30  O ye Spirits and Souls of the Righteous, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

31  O ye holy and humble Men of heart, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

32  O Ananias, Azarias and Misael, bless ye the Lord **:  
praise him, and magnify him for ever.**

**Glory be to the Father, and to the Son :  
and to the Holy Ghost;  
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be :  
world without end. Amen.**

Questions:

* **What is your response to Southwell Minster?**
* **How does the building itself speak to you from the Romanesque Nave to the gothic quire (the Simpson stalls have been called a Benedicite in wood).**

***Read*** *Psalms 122 and 148*

The Chapter House

For people in medieval times the cathedrals offered a remarkable contrast to their small and dark domestic dwellings. They were places of light.

**Read:** 1 Timothy 6:15-16. “ – *he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, King of Kings and Lord of Lords; he alone possesses immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light; him no one has ever seen or can ever see; to him be honour and dominion forever! Amen.”*

**Recall:** 19th century Scottish minister, Walter Chalmers Smith’s hymn.

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,  
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.*

*Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,  
nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might;  
Thy justice, like mountains, high soaring above  
Thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.*

*To all, life Thou givest, to both great and small,  
in all life Thou livest, the true life of all;  
we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,  
and wither and perish, but naught changeth Thee.*

*Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,  
Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their sight;  
all praise we would render, O help us to see  
'tis only the splendour of light hideth Thee!*

Light and Leaves

For Chalmers Smith, leaves are a metaphor for human transience in the context of the immutability and sovereignty of God. *We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree and wither and perish, but naught changeth Thee.* The life cycle of leaves, from their unfurling into the fresh green of spring and the mature colours of summer through to the glorious reds and golds of autumn, are a reminder of our own ageing. For the younger amongst us there is freshness and vigour, for the older the knowledge that when the green chlorophyll has disappeared, the reds, golds, oranges and browns are actually a leaf’s true colours - as if in a final flourish we see someone’s true value.

Questions

* **How do leaves speak to you of your own life?**
* **In the Chapter House they are of stone. What permanent legacy might be the fruit of our lives?**

Pevsner and the leaves

The person most responsible for making the leaves better known in recent times was Sir Nikolaus Pevsner in his classic work *The Leaves of Southwell* which was published in 1945.

In this opening session we reflect on how the leaves stirred his imagination and inspired his book.

Pevsner was born in Leipzig to Russian-Jewish parents and left Germany in 1933 because he found himself on Hitler’s blacklist. He came to this country where he lectured and worked. He was interned as an enemy alien in 1940 but released after 3 months and came to Southwell in 1944. He was captivated by the Chapter House and saw the possibility of a highly original book. It was duly completed and published in the ground-breaking King Penguin series, at a time when book publishing inevitably had strongly nationalistic and patriotic undertones.

What so inspired Pevsner in the dark days of WW2 to write a book that is not only a factual and observational account of the Leaves but is also expressive of his emotions?

*‘Could these leaves of the English countryside with all their freedom move us so deeply if they were not carved in the spirit which so filled the Saints and poets and the thinkers of the 13th century, the spirit of respect for the loveliness of created nature’*

*‘Is it not also a balance of God and the world, the invisible and the visible? So much beauty can exist only because God is in every man and beast in every herb and stone.’*

*‘Seen in this light, the leaves of Southwell assume a new significance as one of the purest symbols surviving in western thought, our thought, in its loftiest mood.’*

It is fascinating to note that Pevsner assumed British citizenship a year later. Might it be that the Chapter House was important to him in his journey from Leipzig to Britain and that it offered a deeper theological understanding of his identity? Might it be that it prompted his later voluminous work?

He offers us at very least an example of someone inspired by the chapter House in a profound way.

Question:

* **Do the leaves help us reflect on our identity and where we find our home?**

Theme Two: Light of the World

Let there be light

*Thou whose almighty word,  
Chaos and darkness heard,  
And took their flight.  
Hear us, we humbly pray,  
and where the gospel-day  
sheds not its glorious ray,  
let there be light.*

John Marriott (1780-1825)

Chaos, to the Ancient Greeks (χάος, *khaos*) refers to the emptiness preceding creation of the universe; to the initial "gap" created by the separation of heaven and earth and of course in our own everyday language; disorder, confusion and unpredictability.

In the Bible God’s command over chaos is commonly identified with light shining into or piercing through darkness:

***Genesis 1:1-5:*** *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.*

***The Gospel According to St. John 1:1-5:*** *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 the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.*

***First Letter of John 1:5-7:*** *This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*

In all of these, and many other similar bible passages, light is identified with God; it is good, it brings order and it brings life and fellowship.

* **What has this to do with leaves?**

Entropy, Life and Leaves

We may never know exactly what was in the minds of the medieval craftsmen who carved them but Southwell Minster’s leaves, and its other celebrations of the natural world certainly reflect profound respect for something. Intriguingly, our scientific view of the world provides its own way of constructing connections between leaves, light, life and divine inspiration.

Science uses the term *entropy* rather than *chaos* when disorder is studied and quantified. Formal definitions of how this is done are couched in the arcane language of thermodynamics. Suffice it to say that a measure can be made of how many different ways the atoms or molecules occupying a space can be configured. Clearly, the more this is, the less ordered or more chaotic things are.

Science also refers to the second law of thermodynamics. This states that the entropy (degree of chaos) in an isolated system never decreases. Matter spontaneously evolves towards higher levels of entropy; greater disorder or chaos. We see this as stones are worn away over time to sand and dust, as metal rusts, fire turns solids into gases, or nuclear reactions break down atoms into smaller particles and differing material configurations.

Life, in all its forms, is an exception to this inevitable process of disintegration. To a biologist life is a process whereby matter, as atoms and molecules, becomes organised into complex but temporarily stable forms.

* Simple molecules interact with others
* to become larger, more complex ones
* that can hold the form of bone
* or the fibres of a stem
* carry nutrients
* change shape and therefore provide movement
* respond to temperature and humidity
* and even carry the blueprint of the succeeding generation as DNA.

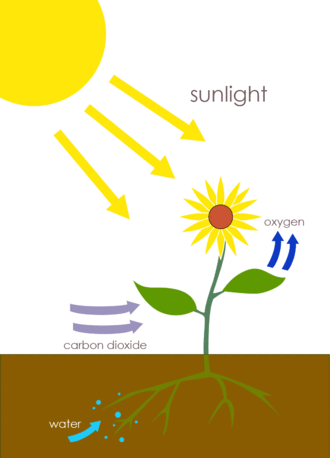
All expressions of life eventually die and as they decay, the molecules making them up resume their inevitable progress towards a higher level of entropy, of disorder or of chaos.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Even so, whilst a plant, a fish, a bacterium, an animal or a person lives, their living is testimony to a challenge to the second law of thermodynamics, of that inevitable slide into chaos and disorder. **This is one way of understanding how Life is different from the inanimate, dead universe … and where is it rooted?**

In all its myriad forms, Life depends upon a supply of chemical energy. For common animals and humans in particular this is mainly as chemical energy, stored as fats, sugars and other carbohydrates, which can be released by reaction with oxygen … and **the fundamental source of stored chemical energy and of oxygen is photosynthesis, the process inherent in leaves**. Here the sun’s radiant energy is captured. Under the influence of light (photons), otherwise inert carbon dioxide and water are turned into energy-holding sugar and oxygen. This happens in chloroplasts which are a defining feature of leaves.

They are the tiny parts of leaves which do this: 



And enable this:

From a physicist’s perspective Life is an oddity. By temporarily defying the second law of thermodynamics and reversing an otherwise inevitable slide towards disintegration, Life does something remarkable, and this can only happen so long as leaves capture the Sun’s rays.

Points to ponder

* **To what extent did all forms of spirituality and worship develop out of a feeling for the life-giving power of (sun) light and God as its creator?**
* **How many biblical references are there to God, light and the sun?**

Here are some that take these cosmic realities and use them to speak of our relationship with God. Share your understandings of each of these verses:

***Isaiah 2:5*** *O house of Jacob, come let us walk in the light of the Lord!*

***Isaiah 9:2*** *The people walking in darkness have seen a great light…a light has dawned*

***Isaiah 60:1*** *Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*

***Isaiah 60:19-20*** *The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory.*

***John 3:19*** *And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.*

***John 8:12*** *Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life’*

***1 Thessalonians 5:5*** *for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not children of the night or darkness.*

**Questions for Discussion**:

* **Can we, as humans regard ourselves as special, or just one part of “Life”?**
* **What are the theological implications of this question?**
* **As *knowing* recipients of cosmic energy, what ethical responsibilities do we carry? How should we understand ‘… have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth’ Genesis 1:28**
* **What might be the differences and similarities between scientific understandings of the natural world and our relationship with the divine?**
* **How might we bring together scientific ways of understanding and earlier, more biblical ways of understanding?**
* **What does it mean to ‘walk in the light’?**
* **How do we do this without becoming judgemental and condemnatory of others?**

***Before the next session …* The Tree of Life, *try and spend a little time in the Minster grounds, a park or woodland. Experience the presence of trees and attempt to connect with their mysteries.***

Theme Three: The Tree of Life

Introductory activity

***Before this session, spend a little time in the Minster grounds, a park or woodland. Experience the presence of trees and attempt to connect with their mysteries.***

[](https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjg35qS6ajcAhUDDewKHTh3BKgQjRx6BAgBEAU&url=https://lifesavingprayers.wordpress.com/2017/10/27/tears-that-fall-down-and-flow-like-a-river/&psig=AOvVaw2UeDveaLSlp1-S89KQATJL&ust=1532009196119781)

**Jeremiah** **17:7 – 8:** Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. ***He is like a tree*** planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.

We can consider the tree: the strength of the trunk, the depth of the roots, the leaves, both as they flourish and as they wither and die. What can the Tree help us learn about our connectedness with each other and with natural world and its place and our place in the balance and harmony? Biblical reference to the tree(s) and our experience and involvement in the natural world can support us in discussion.

Trees in the World

Let’s first consider the tree in the natural world:

‘Trees are the earth's oldest and largest living things. They are our planet's most complex and successful plants and have existed on Earth for 370 million years. There are over 80,000 different species with an astonishing diversity ranging from the dainty Silver Birches, to towering ancient Giant Redwoods growing hundreds of feet high. Ever since they first appeared on the planet, trees have played an invaluable part in regulating our climate, absorbing carbon dioxide form the atmosphere and returning oxygen to it’ (Jenny Linford, The Tree: Wonder of the Natural World)

‘How trees secretly talk to each other’ BBC ideas short videos (2mins) <https://www.bbc.com/ideas/videos/how-trees-secretly-talk-to-each-other/p06c93k9>

If facility is available for the group to watch together it will initiate discussion. Some text from the 2 minute video is included here should that not be possible.

*Trees may look like solitary individuals but the ground beneath them tells a different story.*

*Trees are secretly talking and trading and waging war on each other. They do this using a network of fungi that grow around and inside their roots. The fungi provide the trees with nutrients and in return they receive sugars. But scientists have found that this connection runs far deeper than first thought.*

*By plugging into the fungal network, trees can share resources with each other. The system has been nicknamed the ‘****Wood*** *Wide Web’. It is thought that older trees, fondly known as mother trees use this fungal network to supply shaded seedlings with sugars giving them a better chance of survival. Those trees that are sick or dying may dump their resources into the network which might then be used by healthier neighbours. Plants also use fungi to send messages to one another. If they are attacked they can release chemical signals through their roots which can warn their neighbours to raise their defences.*

*[](http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiXwaa7sP3bAhUC1hQKHZJnCzYQjRx6BAgBEAU&url=http://susanfarrellart.com.au/shop-all/celtic-tree-of-life/&psig=AOvVaw2eP8SLAnn7OsQQIfhsXsiQ&ust=1530515845397466)But like our internet, the Wood Wide Web has the dark side too. Some orchids hack* *the system to steal resources from nearby trees and other species, like the Black Walnut, spread toxic chemicals through the network to sabotage their rivals. Arboreal cybercrime aside, scientists are still debating why plants seem to behave in such an altruistic way. The hidden network creates a thriving community of individuals. When you’re next in woodland you might like to think of trees as part of a big superorganism chatting and swapping information under your feet.*

Produced by the BBC World Service and published, 28th Jun 2018

Questions to ponder

* **What comparisons and similarities can we draw from the science of the text/video?**
* **How can we relate this to our lives and our faith?**

Consider the following Bible texts:

* **Psalm 1:1-3:** *He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers. How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night.*
* **Psalm 92:12-14:** *The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow* ***like a cedar*** *in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God. They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green…*
* **Daniel 4:10-12:** *Now these were the visions in my mind as I lay on my bed: I was looking, and behold, there was a tree in the midst of the earth and its height was great. 'The tree grew large and became strong And its height reached to the sky, And it was visible to the end of the whole earth. 'Its foliage was beautiful and its fruit abundant, And in it was food for all The beasts of the field found shade under it, And the birds of the sky dwelt in its branches, And all living creatures fed themselves from it.*
* *G***enesis 2:9:** *Out of the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*
* **Romans 11:24:** *For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.*

More Questions

* **What do these quotes suggest to us about our connectedness to God and to our relationship with the World?**
* **How do they link with our thoughts about the tree?**

The Tree of Life

The tree is considered to be one of the most popular symbols in the Bible. This material from [meaning of the tree of life](http://www.spiritofthescripture.com/id1402-meaning-of-the-tree-of-life.html) considers the symbolism of the Tree of Life.

*The Meaning of the Tree of Life.* Joshua Tilghman March 2013

*Sometimes called the cosmic or world tree, the tree of life did not originate with the authors of Genesis. For thousands of years it has been used in sacred literature to describe man’s connection with the divine. Although different cultures have known this tree by different names, the essence of this tree’s significance is essentially the same; it represents both divine and natural man, the spiritual and natural world. And just as the tree of life symbolically spans all the worlds of existence, so does man.*

*Consider the Buddha. He was enlightened under the great* Bodhi *tree. Is it really just a coincidence that Odin gained supernatural abilities (enlightenment) under the branches of* Yggdrasil*, the mythological tree of the ancient Scandinavians? How about the fact that ancient Mayan kings, including Pakal Votan, were portrayed on stone monuments with the* world tree *emerging from their head-dress.*

*The tree of life then is the ultimate motif of the evolution of consciousness. Its branches reach into heaven, the spiritual planes. The trunk resides on the material plane, and the roots grow into the earth, or underworld, which represents many subconscious aspects of our soul.*

*The consciousness of man then can be likened unto a tree itself.* ***Psalm 1:3:*** *And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf [true ideals] shall not wither; and whatsoever he does shall prosper.*

Questions to ponder

A tree with green leaves is an expression of beauty and fertility; a tree whose leaves are withering signals death or the absence of fertility. The withering of leaves represents the damage of sin on the flora, as well as on God’s people (Isa. 1:30; Jer. 8:13). Green leaves are a symbol of prosperity and renewal of life (Prov. 11:28; Ps. 1:3); even of hope (Gen. 8:11). The beauty of a tree with abundant foliage was a symbol of fertility and played an important role in Canaanite religion (1 Kings 14:23; Eze. 6:14). Sin damaged trees, yet they were still useful.

* **How can we use the symbolism of the tree to understand our faith and life?**
* **What is the importance of the tree in the balance and harmony of the natural world?**
* **Sustainability, the eco system, its importance in maintaining the balance.**
* **If we are like the tree, with our faith as the core, how can we help the balance and harmony of the world?**

A Prayer

 Like the trunk of the tree give us strength

Like the branches of the tree helps us reach out

Like the roots of the tree help us connect and nourish

Like the leaves of the tree help us to flourish and grow.

In the name of Jesus, Light of the World. **Amen**.

Theme Four: Flourishing.

Seasons and Flourishing

As the Earth makes its annual journey round the sun, the amount and intensity of sunlight reaching different parts of its surface wax and wane. We have seasons; Winter, Spring, Summer and Autumn, and the natural world responds. In general plants and animals that feed on them flourish as the temperature rises and sunlight becomes more intense. Growth slows down and many species hibernate in order to survive the period when days are short and colder.

Our biblical and even medieval antecedents didn’t have this explanation for the seasons but they certainly experienced them, and in particular they must have been moved by the explosion of growth and life that we see in Spring. Buds opening and leaves bursting out to gather life-giving sunlight are a central feature of this. The sense of healthy renewal and an unfolding of previously dormant hope and strength that new spring growth and opening leaves evoke must have been among the stonemasons’ inspirations.

Human Flourishing

Flourishing also has its human dimensions and parallels between wellbeing and healthy natural growth nurtured by acceptance of God’s will abound in scripture. For instance:

***Psalm 1:1-3:*** *Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all they do they prosper.*

***Psalm 92:12:*** *The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.*

***Micah 4:4:*** *they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees…*

***1 Kings 4:25:*** *During Solomon’s lifetime Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, all of them under their vines and fig trees.*

***2 Kings 18:31:*** *… thus says the king of Assyria: ‘Make peace with me and come out to me; then every one of you will eat from your own vine and your own fig tree, and drink water from your own cistern …”*

*And in Jesus’ encounter with Nathanael;*

***John 1:48:*** *Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you*

* **What does it mean to *flourish* in human terms?**
* **What are the differences and similarities between *flourishing* and *happiness*?**

Surveys investigating this attempt to measure *emotional*, *psychological* and *social* well-being. Emotional well-being is recorded as answers to questions about how much respondents have felt *cheerful, satisfied, in good spirits, happy, calm or full of life*. Psychological well-being is a measure of how much they have felt *comfortable with themselves, positively relating to others, a purpose in life or in control of their circumstances*. Social well-being reflects how respondents experience *acceptance by others, meaningful relationships, the ability to make social contributions and social integration*. Clearly these overlap but in one survey of some three thousand subjects only a fifth scored well on a scale made up of all three sets of measures.

* **Is this surprising?**
* **What is it telling us?**

Surviving Hardship and Flourishing

Related surveys also explore what may or may not influence how people feel in this sort of way and an intriguing finding is that surviving hardship not uncommonly results in personal growth and *flourishing.* In one survey of those who survived the Herald of Free Enterprise disaster (the capsizing of a cross channel ferry in 1987), nearly a half felt that their life had actually taken a turn for the better as life moved on. Similar findings emerge from surveys of other groups who have faced disaster or tragedy. One, facing a diagnosis of cancer said “‘What a pity I had to wait till now, when my body is riddled with cancer, to know how to live.”

The springtime flourishing of leaves and the rest of creation is only what it is *because* it is emergence from winter. If there were no seasonal cycle there would be no new growth. Of course, the most striking example of growth and renewal after suffering is Jesus’ death and resurrection, and it is no accident that we celebrate them when the natural world is coming back to life again.

* **Can you identify comparable *flourishing* through suffering in your own life?**
* **What does this way of understanding human well-being have to say about consumerism and the pursuit of comforts and immediate gratification?**
* **How do we imagine human flourishing – personal and social – today?**
* **These surveys do not attempt to identify *spiritual* flourishing. Should they?**
* **In your view, what constitutes spiritual flourishing?**

The Green Man

Quite possibly some of the most disturbing and less comprehensible stone carvings are those of Green Men. It is uncomfortable to even imagine a plant growing within and sprouting out of your mouth and from the top of your head, but that is what they depict. As Malcolm Guite puts it:

*Amidst the tympanum  
His stone hair startles from  
A face in the foliage.  
Not just the bearded barleycorn  
But a whole field springing,  
The vine and all its tendrils,  
Unfold from the face,  
Trip from the tongue  
That speaks the Word  
Amidst the tympanum.*

(The tympanum is that stone structure which, in the Minster, forms an entrance between Quire and Nave. Malcolm Guite uses this example of a Green Man to illustrate his poem, though it is actually in the Chapter House!)

One way of understanding them is to see the men … and ourselves, as vessels of God’s life-giving power which is bursting out in the form of flourishing leaves. As vessels we are not God’s purpose, as such, but a conduit through which it flows.

***Ezekiel 17:24:*** *All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it.*

Final Questions

* Is *flourishing* something we can achieve, just by doing the right things, or is it something that reflects a necessary openness to God and others’ love?
* How does faith in Jesus Christ help human flourishing?
* How does the ministry of the Minster express this vision of human flourishing?
* How is such hopeful imagining of human flourishing needed in our anxious and rapidly changing world?

Theme Five: Leaves and the Healing of the Person

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*And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations* **Revelation 22:2**

*[n.b. We'll explore this passage from Revelation in more detail in the next session.]*

Leaves are certainly in the air at the moment, not only in our current focus on the Chapter House carvings, but also in the recent opening up of the Archbishop's Palace Garden. It is as if that garden, with its wonderful plants and woodland, is bringing us back to the natural source of our stone leaves and providing a quiet and refreshing space for all.

Biblical nature images of healing and new life

Several Bible passages remind us of how leaves, trees and plants can represent healing, blessing and new life, e.g. *'The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom, like the crocus'* (**Isaiah 35:1**). Safety, harmony with the earth and peace (in the Hebrew sense of 'shalom') are represented by the image of people sitting under their vine and their fig tree (**1 Kings 4:25**). And **Psalm 52:8** presents the olive tree as a symbol for the wellbeing that comes from closeness to God.

Jesus' parables of the Kingdom of God are full of examples taken from plants, seeds and crops. He clearly loved the wild flowers, which he will have seen in abundance on the hills of Galilee, and he speaks of the *'lilies of the field*' and *'birds of the air*' to encourage us to trust in the goodness of God our Creator (**Matthew 6:25-33**).

A powerful example of a garden as a place of refuge and solace is the Garden of Gethsemane (literally 'oil press') on the Mount of Olives. We know that it was Jesus' regular custom to come here (**Luke 22:39, John 8:1**), and it seems that these olive trees created a good environment for him to pray and find peace and equilibrium in the middle of his incredibly demanding ministry. So, it makes sense that he chose to go to this familiar place on the night of his arrest, when he was facing such agony of soul.

* **How have gardens or outdoor spaces been for you places for prayer or inner healing?**

Healing Leaves

Many leaves and their extracts are known for their medicinal benefits, such as Eucalyptus to boost the immune system, Tea Tree Oil (from the Australian Melaleuca tree) as an antiseptic and Peppermint to aid digestion. There's also Aspirin from willows and Digoxin from the foxglove.

***The Quiet Garden Movement*** was begun by The Revd Philip Roderick in the UK in 1992, and is now world-wide, offering peaceful havens for prayer and reflection. (Quiet Gardens have a good website, and a few leaflets are available from group leaders). Our own Sacrista Prebend garden is part of this movement. Even spending some time enjoying a single tree, like one of those in the Minster churchyard, can be therapeutic. We don't have to try and make anything happen, but just be there, present to the tree and to God who created it.

The Process of Gardening

* **Do you find the process of gardening therapeutic or prayerful? In what ways?**

In Newcastle upon Tyne some years ago, children with learning disabilities had a garden where they learned to grow vegetables and fruits with great attentiveness and delight. They did this so well that pupils from a number of schools came to learn from these children how best to tend and grow the plants. Healing was happening on a number of levels here.

Healing from Trees

A man who had been bereaved found solace in walking in the woods near his home. He wrote, 'The trees slow me down, and help me to notice and cherish what is good in each moment. Learning to look and listen and touch the trees is somehow reconnecting me with God, even in the pain.'

An accountant in the North of England once stopped in her tracks as she walked to work, because she found herself looking in a new way at a tree which she had passed many times before. It was autumn, and the leaves were a glorious blaze of red. That moment was, for her, a sudden and unexpected experience of hope, beauty and new life, which was given, ironically, when the tree was dying. This was the first step in her journey back to faith in Christ. From then on, she would never read the account of Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush in the desert in quite the same way (cf. **Exodus 3:1-6**).

*(Both of these stories are reproduced with permission, details slightly altered to preserve anonymity.)*

* **How do either of the above examples connect with your own experience?**

From Wilderness to Transformation

Read **Isaiah 32: 14-17.** The image of the wilderness can apply to our personal life, as well as the state of our world (which we shall explore more next time).

* **In what ways can we open up our brokenness to Christ's life-giving and healing energy?**
* **What has been your experience of the Christian ministry of laying on of hands and healing?**

Jesus uses the image of the vine and its branches in **John 15:1-11** to help us open up to his life-giving presence flowing through our inner being. God has been described as 'The Gardener of our souls', looking after us as carefully as a gardener constantly tending, watering, and pruning.

*Seen in the recent Art Exhibition 'Crossings' in the Minster, the picture 'Resurrection Now' by Michael Cook portrays Mary Magdalene entangled in brambles in the garden, and the risen Jesus next to her, blessing her and holding secateurs in his hand. We have been given some postcards of this picture, and there will be three or four available for each group.*

* **How does this image of 'God the Gardener' speak to you?**

One Tree a Day

A man in India, Jadav Payeng, is now called *'the* ***Forest Man of India'***, He lives in Majuli, a river island where there had been an accelerating rate of soil erosion due to flooding during the monsoons. In 1979 Jadav decided to do something about this and began to plant one tree a day in Majuli, using mostly shoots and some seeds from other trees. Now, 39 years later, through his thousands of small acts of faithful planting, there is a forest covering more than 550 hectares, and many species of wildlife live there. There is a short film about this online - 'Forest Man of India'. *N.B. There is also the allegorical tale 'The Man who Planted Trees' by Jean Giono,*

* **What can we learn from this about our own inner life?**

Our Response in the Minster

The cards in our Minster Candle Chapel, on which our visitors are invited to write any concerns for which they would like our prayers, are being printed with a line-drawing of a leaf on them, plus the text from Revelation 22:2, 'The leaves of the tree for the healing of the nations'. As we distribute these cards amongst members of our congregations for us to bring into our own prayers, we can play our part, no matter how small, in Christ's blessing and healing work in the world.

Final Questions

In our Chapter House leaves we have inherited a unique gift, which perhaps gives us a particular responsibility to listen to what the Holy Spirit may be saying to us through them.

* **Are these leaves just a miracle of the masons' art in stone? Or do they call the Minster Community to a unique sharing in God's healing ministry in our world? And, if so, how?**

*'You shall go out with joy and be led forth in peace;  
and the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing;  
and the leaves of the trees shall clap their hands.'* ***Isaiah 55:12***

Theme Six: Leaves & Healing between People & Nations

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*The leaves of the tree for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:2)*

Leaves and Healing

Key Biblical texts remind us of how the leaves of the trees can represent healing, wholeness and flourishing for us all, not only as individuals but also as peoples and nations.

From sixth century BC prophetic literature in the Old Testament to the end of the New Testament, we have a beautiful and vivid image of the river of life, in the books of Ezekiel and Revelation.

Ezekiel, in true prophetic style, is pushing the boundaries. He boldly urges his Jewish hearers, who are now in exile, to picture their beloved Jerusalem Temple (destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC) not as an exclusive possession to keep them safe and protect them from others, but as a spiritual reality out of which flows God's life and blessing *for all* peoples.

And John the Divine, author of Revelation, echoes this and offers his Christ-centred vision of the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city bringing blessing for all nations both now and at the end of time.

*We suggest reading* ***Revelation 22: 1-5*** *first, and then* ***Ezekiel 47: 1-2, 6-12****.*

* **Do any words or phrases strike you in particular in these passages?**

After the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, many people in that city survived but were terribly burned and maimed. Because no normal medical treatment was available Suzuko Numata had to have both legs amputated by flashlight and candlelight, with no anaesthetic. For 18 months she was deeply traumatised.

But in an interview with the *Church* Times in 2005, she describes how she was saved from despair by looking at three Aogiri (Chinese Parasol Trees) in an office courtyard. There had been four trees there, and one had died. She explains:

*'When I saw the three surviving trees for the first time, each with its scars of the burns, but now with twigs and tiny new leaves on them, I gained the energy to live again.'*

The trees were later moved to the Peace Memorial Park where they are protected, but Mrs Numata has permission to go and touch them. *'Giving testimony is my way of planting peace,'* she says.

* **How does this story from Hiroshima strike you? Does it have anything to say to us now, as the Minster community?**

Leaves, Trees and Water

As seen in earlier sessions, one of our core texts is in **Psalm 1:1-3**, where a righteous person is likened to a tree by a stream, drawing on the necessary, life-giving water in order to flourish and bear fruit. This powerful image, and its link with healing, seems to speak to us particularly in Southwell, with our combination of wells and Chapter House leaves, as well as the strong possibility that there was a baptismal pool close to our Chapter House (cf. this has been suggested by Prof. Philip Dixon, consultant archeologist for Southwell Minster).

When Jesus talks with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4: 7-29, he is offering her God's living water as a wellspring within her, to transform her life and flow through her - she subsequently goes back and tells all the townspeople about Jesus. ***As this is quite a long passage you may prefer to read it in full at home and just look at verses 7 to 14 in the group****.*

Here Jesus is breaking down all sorts of barriers and taboos that can damage people; a man talking to a woman in public like this was not considered acceptable at the time; he was defying racial prejudice because she was a Samaritan - only a 'half-Jew' in the eyes of many; and her lifestyle would also have been regarded as highly suspect. That will be why she has come alone to the well in the heat of the day, rather than later with the other women, when it will be cooler.

Jesus sees beyond the barriers and walls we humans so easily create, and reaches out to a vulnerable and valuable human being, offering her the living water of his healing Spirit, which will cleanse and refresh her soul, and overflow to others.

Breaking Down Walls

During his ministry, Jesus constantly broke down barriers, touching lepers, healing the gentile centurion's servant, mixing with tax collectors and prostitutes and treating women with respect.

And the early church wrestled with all the implications of accepting Gentiles as well as Jews into the community of those who were 'in Christ'. It is hard for us now to understand just how revolutionary and painful this was.

* **If you feel comfortable sharing this with the group, have you ever experienced prejudice? And can we discern our own prejudices?**
* **Identify some of the barriers which obstruct the peace and well-being of our world today.**
* **Suggest ways in which the Minster might contribute to the breaking down of today's barriers - including in our own communities, county and country - for the healing of peoples and nations.**

Healing Connections

Coventry Cathedral has links of friendship with German cities such as Dresden, and also Hiroshima. Bronze casts of the sculpture *Reconciliation* by Josefina de Vasconcellos were placed in the ruins of the old Coventry Cathedral and in the Hiroshima Peace Park in Japan in 1995, to mark the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II.



Our own Southwell leaves have led to a special connection with Naumburg Cathedral (in the former East Germany) to which a group from Southwell Minster paid a visit in May 2018. Naumburg, like us, has wonderful mediaeval stone carvings which include detailed and realistic leaves (created about 40 years before ours). There is both poignancy and a sense of healing in this sharing of a common faith and heritage between communities who were former enemies. As Canon Nigel Coates writes in the June & July edition of *Southwell Leaves*:

*'The church transcends boundaries, and in Southwell and in Naumburg are "leaves for the healing of the nations."'*

**Exploring Connections** between olive trees and human well-being: the following resources may be of interest:

1. A short video: *Bethlehem, Hidden from View*, produced by the Amos Trust

2. *Khirbet Khizeh* (especially Chapter 8) by S Yizhar. About an Israeli soldier's experience and wrestling with conscience over the ransacking of a Palestinian village and its olive trees in 1948.

Where do we go from here?

**The Five Marks of Mission in the Anglican Communion** have been identified as:

* *To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom*
* *To teach, baptise and nurture new believers*
* *To respond to human need by loving service*
* *To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation*
* *To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.*

**So for us, as we continue to reflect and pray about what our beautiful carved leaves, set in the Chapter House, might mean for us:**

* **What is the Spirit saying to the Minster and the churches in Southwell today?**

Resources

Books

**Bible and Ecology**, Richard Bauckham, DLT, 2010

**Creation Care and the Gospel**, Colin Bell and Robert White eds, Hendrickson, 2016

**Eco-Theology**, Celia Deane-Drummond, DLT, 2008

**Just Living: Faith and Community in an age of Consumerism**,Ruth Valerio, Hodder & Stoughton, 2016

**L is for Lifestyle: Christian Living that doesn’t cost the earth**,Ruth Valerio, IVP, 2008

**The Hidden Life of Trees**, Peter Wohlleben, William Collins, 2016.

**God is Green**, Ian Bradley, Doubleday, 1992

**Khirbet Khizeh**, S. Yizhar, Granta, 2011

Online

**‘How trees secretly talk to each other’** BBC ideas short videos (2mins) <https://www.bbc.com/ideas/videos/how-trees-secretly-talk-to-each-other/p06c93k9>

**Eco Theology and Anglicanism – Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey**. Icons of Insight <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mfK2R3WTZ4>

**Ellen Bernstein - A Creator God and a Sense of Place: A Jewish Ecotheology**. Chautauqua Institution Interfaith Lecture Series <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGe49y3dy6Q>

**The Environmental Mission of the Church. St Paul’s Institute**. David Shreeve <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGe49y3dy6Q>

**Eco Church Award Scheme Launch**. St Paul’s Cathedral, 26th January 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGe49y3dy6Q>

**Environmental issues and the Anglican Communion**. Episcopal News Video, April 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iH6-7_BcHek&index=13&list=PLWS96mv0ETpwhQu8piTwy_M4HfBJ750WN>