

St James's Piccadilly

'Rooted in God's Earth': Trees in Scripture

New Testament Readings

The Axe at the Root of the Tree

Matthew 3.1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.^{*} ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."' "

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ 'I baptize you with^{*} water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with^{*} the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Called by Jesus under the fig tree

John 1.43-51

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.'⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.'⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is

truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’⁵⁰ Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’⁵¹ And he said to him, ‘Very truly, I tell you,^{*} you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’

Seed Parables

Matthew 13.1-31

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake.² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach.³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow.⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.⁹ Let anyone with ears^{*} listen!’

¹⁰ Then the disciples came and asked him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’¹¹ He answered, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets^{*} of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.¹² For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.¹³ The reason I speak to them in parables is that “seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.”¹⁴ With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

“You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

¹⁵ For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.”

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.¹⁷ Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

¹⁸ ‘Hear then the parable of the sower.¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what

is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.* ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.'

24 He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" ²⁸He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" ²⁹But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn." '

31 He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³²it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'

Zacchaeus in the Sycamore Tree

Luke 19.1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' ⁸Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' ⁹Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

Olives, Palms and Figs

Mark 11.1-14

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ²and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately." ' ⁴They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' ⁶They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

'Hosanna!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

¹¹ Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

¹² On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. ¹³Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard it.

The Wood of the Cross

John 19.16b-30

So they took Jesus; ¹⁷and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew* is called Golgotha. ¹⁸There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. ¹⁹Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth,* the King of the Jews.' ²⁰Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew,* in Latin, and in Greek. ²¹Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, 'Do not write, "The King of the Jews", but, "This man said, I am King of the Jews." ' ²²Pilate answered, 'What I have written I have written.' ²³When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for

each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. ²⁴So they said to one another, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.' This was to fulfil what the scripture says, 'They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.'

²⁵And that is what the soldiers did.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

²⁸ After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' ²⁹A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. ³⁰When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

God's Power to Graft

Romans 11.13-24

¹³ Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry ¹⁴in order to make my own people* jealous, and thus save some of them. ¹⁵For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead! ¹⁶If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.

¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root* of the olive tree, ¹⁸do not vaunt yourselves over the branches. If you do vaunt yourselves, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. ¹⁹You will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' ²⁰That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. ²¹For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you.* ²²Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity towards those who have fallen, but God's kindness towards you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. ²³And even those of Israel,* if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. ²⁴For 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.

Leaves for the Healing of the Nations

Revelation 22.1-13

Then the angel^{*} showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life^{*} with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants^{*} will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.

⁶ And he said to me, 'These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants^{*} what must soon take place.'

⁷ 'See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.'

⁸ I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; ⁹but he said to me, 'You must not do that! I am a fellow-servant^{*} with you and your comrades^{*} the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!'

¹⁰ And he said to me, 'Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. ¹¹Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.'

¹² 'See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. ¹³I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.'