

Dear Friends

If you were following the order of worship last Sunday, you will know it focussed on the idea that we are like trees that send our roots to drink from the living water of God's spirit. I love trees and as I prepared for last Sunday, I was struck how often trees occur in scripture.

With that in mind I wanted to write to you a letter about trees and focus on five trees, the Oak, the Beech, the Apple, the Hawthorne and the Silver Birch. I also want to thank the zoom gathering last Sunday because I was able to share these thoughts with them.

The Oak. Oaks are remarkable trees. When I was a child I lived in a house where an oak wood fringed our garden and when we moved, we moved to a house with a giant oak tree in one corner. Oaks grow slowly but they can live to be a thousand years old. Oaks endure. A cluster of Oak trees provide the backdrop for Abraham's unlikely encounter with God in the book of Genesis (Genesis 18 vs 1-3) In Isaiah 61 the people of God are described as Oaks of righteousness, planted by the Lord for his own Glory.

The Beech. In Gledholt woods, close to where I live there are many beech trees which grow on the steep slopes that descend towards a lake where ducks can be seen. Close to the water there is a fallen beech tree and I have clambered onto its great trunk and walked along it with my arms stretched wide for fear of falling. The soft earth beneath the tree seems to have given way. The remarkable thing about this beech tree is that it is still alive. Some of the tree's roots are still drawing water from the lake and its branches which point skywards at strange angles are clothed with green leaves. This reminded me of the words of Jeremiah 17 vs 7,8 where it says we will be like a tree whose leaves are always green because our roots are sent into the flowing stream.

The Apple. Apples are simply wonderful fruits. We rarely taste an apple straight from a tree but there is nothing like it. My dad's family once had an apple orchard and my dad taught me to test and see if an apple was ready to plucked by gently twisting it. Apples are sweet fruits and wasps make short work of them when they have fallen to the ground, so I try and do this pluck them before they fall so none are wasted. The apple tree in our garden at the manse has about fifty apples on this year so it's a

good year and I am looking forward to pies and crumbles, stews and simply crunching one straight from the tree. In that reading from Jeremiah it says that if we are like trees with our roots actively seeking the living water of God's spirit we will always be fruitful, As we share the gifts God has given in a Christlike way people will taste and see that God is good.

Hawthorne, Hawthorne is a thorny tree that often grows in wild and inhospitable places that are exposed to the wind and the salty sea air. Being thorny the sheep that often live in these wild places are disinclined to eat mature Hawthorne trees.

Hawthorne trees are survivors and in spring they have beautiful flowers. In these wild places where there may be no other trees Hawthorne trees can also provide shelter from the wild elements especially as they tend to grow away from the prevailing wind. Sometimes we meet people who seem to flourish in places that seem inhospitable and unwelcoming to you or me. I am glad of the Hawthorne Tree.

Silver Birch. When I lived in Wakefield thirty years ago there were many old colliery sites that were being returned to nature, some by design and some by neglect. One of the first trees to colonise these once industrial landscapes is the Silver Birch. This slim tree with its silver bark seems delicate and in winter the purple hue of silver birch trees growing together is beautiful and almost ethereal. The Silver Birch is one of the first trees to take root in these neglected environments and make a home there. As Christians we are called to make our home in places that may seem strange to us at first. Many people reading this letter may have experienced a sense of exile when they moved to Huddersfield, making a new home with their families, moving from another part of the United Kingdom or elsewhere, coming as a refugee seeking a place of safety. We can be like the silver birch.

Let me close with the words of Isaiah.

'For you shall go out with joy and be led forth in peace, the mountains and the hills shall break into song before you and the trees of the field shall clap, shall clap their hands!' Isaiah 55 vs 12.13

Your friend and pastor

Mark

