

Our Lives are Linked to Trees

It would be hard to imagine a world without trees. Look out your windows and consider what the land before you would look like without trees! As you drive down the roads all you would see only plain terrain and barrenness. There would be no shade except the shadows cast by hills. Moreover, there would be no fruit. Indeed, our very lives are linked to trees, and meditation upon trees is necessary to understand our origins. We find in Genesis 2:9a that “out of the ground the Lord God made every tree to grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.” The ancients intuitively knew there was something more to trees than what meets the eye. In fact, before man built temples, humanity worshiped under trees. “*...Then Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there called on the name of they Lord, the Everlasting God*” (Gen. 21:33, cf. 13:8).

Sacred trees and groves formed man’s first cathedrals; indeed, the Gothic cathedrals with their mighty columns and ribbed arches are patterned on and inspired by the great trees of Northern Europe. I remember a holy moment when visiting the ancient cathedral at Rheims, when the sunlight shone through the stain-glassed windows like luminous bars as it does through an opening of the dense tree cover in the forest roof.

There is, however, a dark side to trees and sacred groves in Scripture. In many places in Deuteronomy, Samuel, and Kings, the prophets condemn these “high places” for their occult and pagan activity. Apostate Israelites would go to these sacred groves, forsaking the true worship of the Lord established by the Law and revelation at the Temple. This brought upon Israel her death as a nation. The point is clear; our lives are linked to trees—we live by them or we die by them!

Let us begin our meditation on trees by returning to Genesis 2:9, where we find that God planted two specific trees; the tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is important to note: the first tree to be specifically named is the tree of life, and it was specifically situated in the midst of the garden. These facts about this tree, that it is first mentioned and that it was located in the middle of the garden, tells us something about God. He desires us to have life, and to have it abundantly. He doesn’t want us to miss out, He doesn’t hide it or make it difficult for us to find. He places life in the center before us so we cannot miss it.

There are two theories about this tree. One theory ascribes to this tree the power of instantaneous eternal life. By this theory, it is assumed God made man with the potential for eternal life, and for that matter, eternal death. By partaking of the tree of life, mankind would be instantaneously translated into an immortal state. The verse of Genesis 3:22 seems, on the surface, to suggest this view in that God, after our first parents took of the tree of good and evil, banished them from the garden specifically so that they would not *also* take of the tree of life, and live forever in a sinful, rebellious state. This theory assumes Adam and Eve never took from the tree of life.

There is, however, another way to look at this tree, that is, sacramentally. The second theory holds that since this tree was set in the middle of the garden where Adam and Eve could not miss it, and since they were not prohibited from taking from it, it is difficult to imagine our curious ancestors would not have partaken from this tree. In this case, the tree and its fruit was a physical means by which God administered to them the grace of life. Therefore, the tree symbolizes for us the relationship that bound God to humanity. Taking from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil broke this bond, and therefore, the tree of life was taken from them. [In other words, the infusion of life God gave to them through the tree was taken from them and as a consequence so was the relationship with Him.] ,??? that is, the infusion of life that God endowed the tree provided and the relationship that necessarily was connected with it. Viewing the Bible as a whole, this theory has much to commend itself, as we shall see.

However we see this tree, the main point remains: God intends us to have life. Can you see with your soul's eyes the deep rich green of Eden's trees? Can you feel with your soul the breeze of God, the *ruah Elohim*, gently moving the luxuriant boughs? God intends us to have life, and has from the very beginning linked life with trees.

Only when we consider that the first and most central tree in the garden was the tree of life can we understand the second tree, that of the knowledge of good and evil. It is important to understand this was not a bad tree *per se*. The phrase "good and evil" in the Bible simply means "all knowledge." Such a phrase is called a merism where two extremes are set forth which include the totality of everything in between these two extremes. Moreover, that the tree was planted in Eden in the first place tells us this tree was good and essential for humanity. God intended Adam and Eve to possess

its secrets, but it had to be according to God's way and timing.

The core issue about this tree was the divine command which tested the obedience of our first parents. God did not explain to them why they could not take of it. All they had was a simple command with a warning that something referred to as death would befall them. Such a command could not be ignored; it had to be obeyed or disobeyed. As such, this tree represented something—autonomy! Autonomy means being self-sufficient, and self-governing. Theologically speaking, autonomy means life without God, which spells death since God is the very source of life. Hence this tree was not some poisonous plant. Rather, it was merely a physical door through which evil and death entered the physical realm.

Once one tastes the fruit of autonomy, one is immediately hooked on it. C.S. Lewis describes well the effect of this fruit in his story *The Lion, Witch, and the Wardrobe* where Edmond, who symbolizes fallen humanity, finds himself hungry before the witch. She produces a magical bottle out of which she lets fall a drop which, when it touched the snow became a warm creamy drink. She let fall another drop which produced a box full of Turkish delight. He had never tasted anything so delicious. Little did Edmond know that once he had tasted it he would want more and more, even to the point of gorging on it to the point of killing himself. Later in the story, when Edmond had gone over to the witch's side, Mr. Beaver remarked that he could tell in Edmond's eyes that he had the witch's food, for those who have taken it have a certain look about them.

The fruit of autonomy is very powerful stuff. Once we have taken it, our eyes glaze over, and we find ourselves craving more. It is a very heady thing to rise up and say,

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.¹

We revel in the illusion that we are God, that we are ultimate, and that, therefore, we can do or be anything we want to do or be. We are the captain of our souls! We are so hooked on autonomy we

¹ From W. E. Henley's *Invictus*.

cannot imagine life without it. In fact, it becomes a living death. And so we see our lives became linked to death through unlawfully taking from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

But why such a dreadful prize in the garden? Is God cruel? Didn't He know we humans would fall for it? The answer lies in the fact that this tree can only be understood in the context of the tree of life. The two stand together, forcing a choice. Shall they throw away allowed, or perhaps even experienced, relational pleasures with God through the tree of life in favor of unallowed secrets and powers through the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? You see, man is like God; he has been endowed with a free will. Choice was necessary for original man, innocent and naked as he was, to grow into the full stature God intended him to attain. If he was obedient, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would have been his to eat, and it would have completed God's work in him. Without such a real choice with real consequences, man could never be what we are: images of God. The very powers of life and death are linked to trees.

It is not an incidental detail that our Lord was crucified on a wooden cross, which our apostolic fathers freely called a tree. The question before us is this, what kind of tree was it? What we have here is truly the most wonderful metamorphosis in all our world. of symbolic truth. The tree of Christ is the composite of both the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Jesus, the second Adam, freely chose the tree of death and autonomy, not out of disobedience, but out of love and obedience, transforming it into the tree of life for us. The crucifix is the most powerful symbol in all the world. On the surface we see death. But the outspread limbs of this tree are the arms of God reaching out to embrace all that is fallen. What strange and wonderful fruit we find on this tree! His body and blood become the very fruit of the tree of life, which we partake of in Holy Communion, our Eucharistic Feast. Moreover, this fruit opens up to us all the mysteries of divine knowledge which God has always intended us to have. We come no longer naked and innocent like pre-tested Adam, but clothed in the righteousness of Christ in whom all knowledge dwells.

Jesus' tree has restored to us our relationship with God that was broken at the Fall. Still, in this life we have a hankering for the old tree of autonomy. A residual taste for it still lingers on our palates. Think of all the times and places of our days where we do what we want to do, and we really do not let Jesus in. Indeed, if we look carefully, we still see the fruit of the tree of autonomy in our homes

and our activities. We express our autonomy when we think or do anything without inviting in Jesus Christ. Much of this is done unthinkingly. Pray about this. Let us develop a sophisticated taste for the broad and wonderful banquet the tree of Christ provides. Everything we could ever want is there and more! Remember, our lives are necessarily linked to a tree, be it Adam's or Christ's!