

THE TREE OF LIFE

Lent I

Holy Trinity, Nice

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Thomas Hardy, both in his poetry and in his novels is famous for both his pessimism and for his love of the macabre. It even followed him at his death. His body was buried in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey, but his heart was buried in the grave of his first wife at Stinsford in Dorset, where he had spent his childhood. Amongst the various macabre episodes of his novels, one of the most intriguing is that of the great tree in *The Woodlanders*. The tree stands outside the house of Marty South. Her father John is fearful that the great tree outside his house may fall. The fall of the tree is a symbol of evil, and John South will die if it falls he believes. As he lies mortally sick, so the doctor orders the tree to be felled since South keeps worrying about it. With the tree gone, South dies of shock.

Trees are, of course, where we began today. The legendary primaeval tale of human temptation revolves around *the tree of good and evil*. It is symbolic both of obedience and loyalty to God, *and*, through that, it is a sign of the moral boundaries which humanity is adjured from crossing. The scene is set in paradise. Humanity, in the 'mythical' portrait of Adam and Eve, is given all that could possibly be hoped for – Eden, as an image, retains that same resonance still. 'This is no garden of Eden', one hears people say about somewhere or some situation they abhor.

But still for Eden to exist, there must still remain boundaries, they are part of Eden - the tree of good and evil is the potent signal for this. So, boundaries crucially matter in this ancient folk tale – as indeed we see too in the tableau of Jesus' temptations in our gospel this morning. Satan bids Jesus ignore boundaries. The world has not changed. Boundaries are perhaps even more unpopular in our contemporary world. They represent unwelcome constraints on the individual and the community.

Another of my favourite literary reflections on boundaries also engages, amongst other things, with trees. In his delightful poem *Mending Wall*, the American writer, Robert Frost reflects on this same theme, so he writes:

'Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast. . .
...at Spring mending time we find them there.
I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.'

As the poet reflects further he begins to convince himself that walls are at the least ambiguous in their impact, perhaps worse. Surely they're not always needed, so the poet goes

on to think further of the man next door as he looks upon fallen boulders. Is all this wall necessary?

‘There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, “Good fences make good neighbours.”’

Frost’s poem shows a subtle ambivalence for boundaries:

‘Something there is that doesn’t love a wall
That wants it down.’

But the poet never shuns walls utterly. Even those different trees – pines and apple orchards are themselves signs of a boundary.

As we set out on our journey through Lent, a journey which in the early church was one of intense preparation for neophytes – that is new believers, new disciples - as they approached baptism, so the pattern of life in Christ was central. What was called out of them? What were the boundaries that marked out the path? How was the Christian journey marked out? It is just these questions that quizzically and through allegory and folk tale we encounter today.

Trees, then, which is where we began, have in different ways often been symbolic for human life. Trees, reaching up to the heavens, often blown by the wind, watered by the rain, nourished by the earth are symbols of life and energy, reaching up even to God. But trees too have taken on a more solemn, even brooding feel to them. Still today in England – there are ‘stricken trees’, gallows or high points in the landscape – Combe Gibbet on the Berkshire Downs, or Winter’s Gibbet at Elsdon on the edge of the Cheviots, for example, tell their sad tale. France abandoned gallows for a crisper form of execution so I imagine no scaffolds survive.

But, of course, absolutely at the heart of the Christian faith stands another equally ambiguous tree, that is, the tree of the Cross. That tree and its meaning is the substance of Paul’s complex reflection in our second reading. For it is the *Cross* that *justifies* humanity – justify here means ‘make right’. We are made right with God by the cross of Christ. The great Passiontide hymn captures it most movingly.

‘Bend thy boughs, O Tree of Glory,
Thy too rigid sinews bend;
For awhile the ancient rigour
That thy birth bestowed, suspend,
And the king of heavenly beauty
On thy bosom gently tend.’

This same hymn earlier on sung:

‘When he fell on death by tasting
Fruit of the forbidden tree:
Then another tree was chosen
Which the world from death would free.’

So the ambiguity of the tree as an image sets us on our way through Lent – setting out for us a pathway, a pathway with subtle and sometimes ambiguous boundaries. But it is a path that promises a tree whose fruits will be for the salvation, the liberation, indeed the final glory of all humankind.

Readings

Genesis 2. 15-17, 3. 1-7

Romans 5. 12-19

Matthew 4. 1-11.