

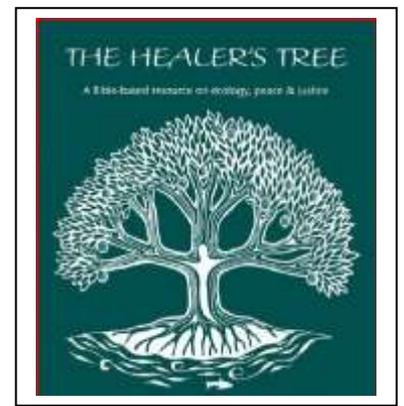
The Healer's Tree
Feast of Holy Cross
17 September 2017
The Revd Jenny Wilkens

Numbers 21:4-9

1 Corinthians 1:18-24

John 3:13-17

http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html



One of the things I love about the Christchurch spring is watching the trees burst forth into leaf in all their variant vivid shades of green – whether those along Bealey Ave or the weeping willows in Park Tce and along the Avon, or the big tree in my own garden I see from my bedroom window.

The Biblical narrative holds together the imagery of 3 trees in 3 gardens. The Genesis story of creation has in the Garden of Eden *the tree of life* and the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. The human beings' eating of the forbidden fruit symbolises the exercise of human freedom, choice and independence. The freewill given to humankind to make good choices or bad choices ends up in the loss of innocence, sin and its consequences in enmity, breakdown of relationship with God and other people, all that has brought so much evil and conflict into the world.

If humanity's falls into sin is portrayed through the image of a tree in a garden, we are also saved through a tree, the tree of Calvary, the tree on which Christ is crucified – in the very early sermons of Acts, Peter proclaims, "They put him to death by hanging him on a tree" (Acts 5:30, 10:39).

Later John's gospel takes up this imagery of the garden: 'Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb... And so...they laid Jesus there.' (John 19:41-2)

John's Gospel will reprise the garden of Eden *creation* story, framing the account of Jesus' resurrection as the dawn of a *new creation*, and the garden will be the setting for Mary Magdalene's memorable encounter with the one she took to be the Gardener of the garden, the risen Christ.

Finally in the book of Revelation we see the tremendous vision of the garden-city of God, where along the banks of an abundant river, there grows a tree, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations (Rev 22:2). The *tree of life* becomes the *tree of salvation* which becomes the *tree of healing* and wholeness, the tree that brings peace and life in God's new creation. These 3 trees thus meld into one.

You can see more of this melding in the ancient legend that the *cross* was made with wood of the tree from which the apple was taken: 'Out of that very tree that made us suffer, began our salvation after it had carried him who was both God and human'.

Hence in Jerusalem, beneath the traditional site of the cross in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is sited the Chapel of Adam: 'we think that Paradise and Calvary, Christ's cross and Adam's, stood in one place.' In the same way many artistic depictions of the crucifixion have at the foot of the cross a skull, symbolising the humanity of Adam and also his mortality, yet death will be defeated at the cross and in the resurrection.

I have long been fascinated by the earliest portrayals of the cross in art and poetry in our Western tradition, such as in Celtic and Anglo-Saxon high crosses and poems. There the focus is not so much on the suffering of Jesus on the cross, as it was in later Mediaeval art. Rather the focus in the first millennium, what we often call the Dark Ages, is on the conflict and the victory of the cross. Life in those early centuries was often short and brutal, with inter-tribal warfare always a possibility if not a reality.

So the Cross became the symbol of Christ's victory over all the powers of evil.

The Cross itself was even given the powers of speech to tell its story. One such famous 8th century Anglo-Saxon poem is the '*Dream of the Rood*'¹, r-o-o-d being a word for the cross, still used today when speaking of 'rood screens' in some churches.

In the *Dream of the Rood*, the poet first sees the tree 'stained and marred, stricken with shame'; the wound in Christ's side penetrated the cross also: the cross too 'bled from the right side', it became 'the Healer's tree'.

Then the cross speaks, telling of how it saw 'marching towards me humankind's brave king, coming to climb upon me'.

'God almighty unclothed himself when he would mount the Cross, courageous in the sight of all. I bore the powerful King, the Lord of heaven; I durst not bend. Men mocked us both together. I was bedewed with blood. Christ was on the cross. Then I leaned down to the hands of men, and they took God Almighty.'² Darkness enveloped the cross and its victim in a terrible struggle – all creation wept. Then at last comes the burial of the dead Christ, 'the bringer of victory, spent from the great struggle', before the cross too is felled and buried in a great pit. But just as Christ rises from the dead, so the cross is rescued by 'the Lord's men' and prepared for veneration, 'girt with gold and silver'.

Now, the tree-cross explains to the dreamer, it is a way for people to find their salvation. We may be in awe of standing before the glorified Christ, but those who have the tree-cross in their hearts need have no fear³. Perhaps making the sign of the cross over our heart is a reminder of that to us.

¹ Dales, Douglas. *Called to be angels: an introduction to Anglo-Saxon spirituality*. Canterbury Press: Norwich, 1998, p. 59ff

² 'The Cross, the Tree of Life' in ed. Benedicte Ward, *Christ within me: prayers and meditations from the Anglo-Saxon tradition*. Darton Longman Todd, London, 1999.

³ Annie Heppenstall, *The Healer's Tree*. Wild Goose Publications, The Iona Community, Glasgow, 2011, 36.

We may find it rather strange, this identification of the cross with the Saviour, but it is deeply incarnational and material, a reminder that Christ redeems our humanity *and* the whole of creation. From a 10th-century homily: “We must always remember how the Lord rescued us from evil by his suffering, when he ascended his rood-tree and shed his precious blood for our salvation. We should honour the holy victory-sign of Christ’s cross.”⁴

I wonder if you see how such language echoes the theology of the cross we heard in John’s gospel, where the place of Jesus’ glorification is the cross – ‘so must the Son of Man be *lifted up*, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life’ (John 3: 14, 15); ‘I when I am *lifted up* from the earth will draw all people to myself’ (John 12:32).

This is not the glorification of suffering in and of itself, but rather the glory that is revealed in the self-giving love of Christ, willing to absorb all that is thrown at him by our inhumanity, by the sin and evil that could have come from any one of us. This is not a vengeful God inflicting punishment on his innocent Son, in place of the punishment that was due to us. No, rather this is ‘God in Christ, reconciling the world to Godself’ (2 Cor. 5:19). ‘*God almighty unclothed himself when he would mount the Cross*’.

You may like to take away that image of the cross as the Healer’s Tree and reflect on it as you walk about this garden-city in springtime. We are aware as perhaps never before of the fragility of our earth and its ecosystems and waterways, its animal, bird and plant life. And we are painfully aware of the fragility of this planet’s peace with those in our world who treat missiles like toys to play with, and disregard the sanctity of human life in inflicting maximum damage on the innocent.

We long for the vision of Revelation’s new creation, where the life-giving river flows through the city, and the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations. We who have tasted of the living waters of the Spirit are called each of us too to be a wellspring of God’s healing goodness, nurturing fruit and leaves that give true peace to all nations, all peoples, all living things.

I want to conclude with a prayer⁵ based on this vision:

Let me walk along that riverbank in the shade of your healing trees, to gather the leaves as peace-gifts to the world....let me walk along the riverbank in the scent of blossoms and perfect fruits and gather a harvest free to all. Let me carry your abundance back into the city, ...and wherever I go, may you walk with me, so each living thing may be blessed. Let me follow the river right back to its source, let me find there the temple, the garden, the throne, let me find there your light, your presence as lamb, all-powerful gentle one, Source of all. Amen.

⁴ The Blickling Homilies, in Dales, *ibid*, p.60

⁵ Annie Heppenstall, *ibid*. 155-156.