

Leaves

Forest Church; Oct 31st 2021

Friday morning found me outside the front door of our house, brush and shovel in hand, bucket and green bin close by, engaged in the seemingly never-ending autumnal task of sweeping up leaves. The interplay of wind and buildings on the vicarage drive is such that the vast majority of fallen leaves end up in a big, often soggy, clump right outside the front door – ready to be walked into the house every time someone returns home.

But in case you think I don't have a very good relationship with autumn leaves, let me say that I have to confess that I have some very happy childhood memories of kicking through huge drifts of bright crisp yellow and gold leaves in a Cumbrian village which was one of my family's favourite places to visit. (And I have to confess that I still can't resist a good swish through a swathe of them – even on Widney Lane.)

And here we are today – surrounded by thousands of fallen, and rather soggy, leaves – seeking something of God in this place. In a few minutes, as usual at Forest Church, I'll be inviting you to go and explore – to open your physical and spiritual senses to what God might be showing you, what he might be saying to you.

Here are a few thoughts to act as a springboard to our exploration.

We've already heard about the fig leaves in the Garden of Eden. Jesus returns to fig leaves in one of the conversations he has with his disciples in the days leading up to his death.

"Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near." ¹

And ok – it's a bit cheaty to use this passage, because Jesus is actually speaking in a parable here, reminding his listeners that when you see the small event, it's a sign that the big event is on the way.

But let's just sit with that idea of new leaves in the springtime. The first part of the story of these leaves which lie around us now, or still flutter wildly on the trees, awaiting their moment to let go and fly.

For the people of Jerusalem, the swelling leaf buds on the fig trees were the first sign of summer – new leaves, new life. Springing forth in joy. **What can leaves tell us about joyful worship of our Creator?**

As the countryside turns from brown to fresh spring green?

When we experience the interplay of light and shadow on a sunny day in temperate woodland – for me, a very thin place².

As they dance in a summer breeze?

"If the leaves were made to worship, so will I" to paraphrase a contemporary worship song³.

What can leaves tell us about making a quiet contribution to life? There's not much fussy about a leaf. Unlike flowers and fruits they are functional and quietly get on with what they were made to do. Reaching out to the source of light and nourishment.

So many leaves on a single tree – all with their part to play. All participating. All drawing on the life-giving water sucked up by the roots. All producing sugars which are spread through the rest of the tree so it can develop and grow - produce fruit. "I am the Vine" says Jesus. Maybe in an environment where we don't

¹ Mark 13:28

² A "thin place" is a term from Celtic Christianity for place where it seems as if heaven and earth are touching

³ [So Will I \(100 billion times\)](#)

see that many vines, perhaps “I am the tree, you are the leaves” would be an appropriate alternative metaphor. When you look at some leaves you can see the veins which link the leaf to the rest of the tree, just as we need to be linked in to Jesus.

And in the process, removing the carbon dioxide which would otherwise choke life on earth. Which is already acting as a stifling blanket around the planet, threatening our very existence. **How do we act as filters in the world around us?** Being agents through which the light of God can shine in the dark places, and bring fresh life and hope and growth. Like the leaves.

Maybe we do well to remember that trees produce leaves in keeping with the climate in which they grow. Tropical rainforests produce large, shiny leaves where water flows off and there is such an abundance of resources, what there is no need to be frugal. Colder or dry climates produce spiky evergreens, holding on to every last drop of precious water.

What about us? Do we reflect our environment? Are we so bathed in the love of God that we allow that love to overflow to those around us? Or maybe looking at it from a different perspective – why is that difficult person spiky? Is there something about their past or current environment which has contributed to that? Does that affect my response to them?

Maybe the leaves can tell us important things about offering shade, and shelter, and rest to those for whom life is hard.

And so to the end of the autumn. At the end of their lives, when their work is done, leaves fall. Yet maybe they show us something here too. For even in death and decay they give new life. The leaf mould nourishes future years’ growth. When I was sweeping up the leaves on Friday I saw a snail already feeding on the fallen leaf matter.

Tomorrow we remember All Saints Day, the day after, All Souls. It’s the time of year when we remember those who have gone before. Those who are waiting, resting in peace with God for the Day of Resurrection. Yet even before then, as we remember them, and reflect on their lives, they can nourish us in our walk with God. Not just the famous ones – the St Peters and St Pauls and Mother Therasas – but on the ordinary self-giving Christian people who have influenced our lives. The ones who have quietly moved the chaos of the world closer to the kingdom of God.

So as we thank God for those who have nourished us in our Christian journey, so we think about our own influence on those around us and the generations which follow us. Are we a window through which they catch a glimpse of Jesus?

And so we have thought about a couple of “leaf-y” places in the Bible.

Leaves feature again right at the end of the Bible, in St John’s vision of the City of God, which speaks of the tree of life – “and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”⁴

The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. What might that mean?

Leaves exist to “give” to the plant or tree. They are self-giving – especially on a deciduous tree. Perhaps that is the answer. Self-giving love. Maybe that is what is need for the healing of the nations.

Life lived as God always intended it to be lived.

Life as lived out by Jesus. The power of love, rather than the love of power.

Unconditional, self-giving love.

Truly – there are many ways in which we can see the fingerprints of God in a pile of soggy leaves.

⁴ Rev 22:1-2