

Langton Long - Sunday 13 January 2008

“Jesus’ Roots”

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The weather this week has meant that I have cast an eye out of the window on several occasions. At the bottom of next doors garden is an old tree which is due to be cut down in a few weeks time. It has died and it is clear that there is nothing alive about it.

It is reminiscent of Jesus words in John 15:6

If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

This tree is so weak we have real fears that it will not even make it to its day of destiny in a few weeks. Contrasting that, are the signs of daffodils in our front garden. Life which is trying to burst through. One of the things, though, about plants is their need for roots. For the daffodil, the roots are short and fragile, reflecting the life above ground. Take the tree, though, and our fear is that the roots, however far they reach down, are diseased or dead and cannot support the 50 or 60 feet above the ground. As a very amateur gardener, I am one of those who plants and expects things to grow instantly.

When Jesus described himself as the vine, the image he portrays is that of a mature and fully grown vine. It is of a plant which has strong roots, which has already produced fruit and wants to produce more. He talks about branches being grafted, and the need for pruning that which has grown but is not diseased or dead. He is not talking about a fresh new plant. And when Jesus talks about himself in horticultural terms, we should instinctively go back to a reading we heard over Christmas: Go back to Isaiah 11 and we read: ***A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him.*** The image is of new life taking on the roots of that which is no more than a stump, new life which shall have the life within it which only the Holy Spirit can provide. For the gardeners like me who want instant results, there is a lack of appreciation about what roots are really about. Roots are about a search for nourishment, a search for that which is going to bring life. Roots are not normally terribly attractive.

If you have ever been to the wonderful Blue Pool down near Wareham, there are the roots of a tree which have been exposed by the erosion of the soil at the side of the pool. The roots are spectacular in their size and in their complexity, but hardly attractive. If we have learnt one thing about the Bible over the past few months of looking at "The Big Picture", it is surely that the roots of Salvation delves deep into the Old Testament.

The search for salvation has raised prototype Saviours and shown us the need for a relationship based on love rather than ritual. It has shown us the complexities of God's plan which has not always been attractive in terms of sacrifice and slaughter, but has been effective in preparing the ground for Jesus arrival. But, and it is a big "but", in the same way that we concentrate on the plant above the surface and ignore at our peril the importance of roots, we have all too often concentrated on the manifestation of Jesus as we see it in the Gospels and not understood the importance of his roots in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament prepares the ground for us to be ready to understand the significance of Jesus' actions. The Old Testament feeds our appreciation of Jesus' words. The Old Testament provides the hidden basis for all that Jesus has come to do in the Cross and the empty tomb.

In our reading from Luke's Gospel we have the story of Jesus demonstrating that his roots were in the Old Testament. His parents have gone up for the Passover. It is the Passover, the significant moment in Old Testament history which, as we saw in the autumn, provides the model for the Easter Story itself. And Jesus immerses himself in it.

Could it be that what he was talking about during those three days was the significance of the Festival itself and talking through what it would mean with the arrival of the Messiah?

Could it be that Luke is trying to tell us of Jesus, at the age of 12, already having a deep understanding of his mission, and demonstrating it to those in the Temple who, if anyone, could have had the eyes to see it?

Could it be that Mary, who is the one character common to the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel, has "**Treasured up these things in her heart**" and is reflecting on them and only in her old age is finally grasping that this child, this boy, burned with love and obedience for his father at an amazingly early age?

Jesus' roots go back into the Old Testament.

In the Creed, we speak of him being there at the moment of Creation. In the work of the Holy Spirit, we see aspects of the Character of Jesus in so many characters of the Old Testament. The prototype saviours in Noah, Joseph, Moses, David and others, and even in John The Baptist are the characters which, as John himself says: John 1:30 **This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.** They fade in their importance as Jesus grows in his.

Jesus has his roots in the Old Testament, but, as our verses from Philippians, the verses we have as our Verse for the year say: Jesus has his roots in Heaven. If we see Jesus only from the surface upwards then we not only fail to recognise what his Old Testament roots say about him, but also the fact that his roots are in Heaven, The Incarnation, the idea of God becoming a man and walking about among us is a fundamental aspect of Christian Theology. Unlike other faiths, which rely on prophets who speak about God, or have God appear in non-human forms, the Christian faith, alone proclaims a God who comes to us in human form as God himself. Jesus says in John 14:09 **Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.**

In verse after verse Jesus makes it clear beyond any shadow of a doubt that he is God, that within the mystery of the Trinity he is a different entity or person, but still one with his Father. And in Philippians 2, which is possibly the oldest Creed in the world, we have the statement that Jesus, **Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.**

He came as a baby, the incarnated Son of God. But he was and is, still God. The reason he was able to live a perfect life. The reason he was able to perform miracles. The reason he was able to speak with authority of things which no-one else could, was because his roots were not just in the Old Testament but also in Heaven itself.

I said that Philippians was maybe the oldest Creed in the world. There is one that is older and it is perhaps the shortest creed of all. Incorporated into the verses in Philippians is the statement which, one day, every person on earth and in history will make, freely or because they will then recognise what they may have spent a lifetime denying: **Jesus Christ is Lord.**

A simple statement. Because if Jesus Christ is Lord, then no-one else is. There is no room for anyone else to have authority or the Glory. ***Jesus Christ is Lord***. And the Greek word for Lord used here is *kyrios*: a word which is used throughout the Greek version of the Old Testament for *Yahweh*, God himself. Jesus is not just Lord, he is God himself. A name like Beckham, or Blair or Bush may have a certain degree of significance. But the name of Jesus the name which Paul tells us is the name which God has given him, the name that is above every name, is a name that will bring every person in history to their knees.

We can understand something of this because we have seen that the Baby of Bethlehem grew to be the Teacher of Nazareth and the Christ of Calvary. We see above the surface, what we have learnt and what we have experienced. How much more can we see this Jesus Christ as the one whose roots stretch back to Creation itself, who was foretold and shown in partial form in the prophets and in the leaders of the Old Testament, who gave up the Glory of Heaven to humble himself - and yet be the greatest human being ever to walk the earth. How much more can we see when we go beneath the surface.

Because when we do, we, too, dig our roots deeper into him, bringing strength to withstand all that this life throws at us, that we may be able to say not just with our lips but show proof with our lives that Jesus Christ is indeed, the name above all names and the name at which we bow and worship, bringing Glory to God.

Amen