

**12.10.08, St Andrew's Chesterton**

**Tree of Life: Healing Leaves**

**A sermon preached by Nick Moir**

*'The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.'*

Whilst my wife writes learned books my only appearance in print is one I would rather forget about – so why I'm mentioning it this morning I'm not sure. Back in the early 90s there appeared a volume called 'The Spiritual Quest of Francis Wagstaffe'. Francis Wagstaffe was not a real person but an alias in whose name a couple of scurrilous wags wrote tranches of letters to the Bishops and other dignitaries of the Church of England. I haven't time to go into the details but I was working as Chaplain to the Bishop of St Albans, John B Taylor, at the time. A letter came from a man who claimed that he had done the Bishop a terrible wrong in a previous life; under hypnotherapy he had been taken back to this and he was writing to make amends. In fact the Bishop in a previous life was Guy Fawkes and Francis Wagstaffe was the executioner who did unspeakable things to him. Would the Bishop forgive him? Well, there were letters to and fro in which the Bishop offered any forgiveness required but disavowed any belief in reincarnation. During this exchange I wrote a letter seeking to shut down the correspondence and get him to talk to his local vicar. In it, I had pointed out that the Bishop was an Old testament scholar and Hebraist. The reply came:

*Dear Bishop*

*I have just had your letter from your boy Nick. Will you say thank you to him for me please.*

*He has tried to brush off my experiences with the callowness of youth, but you and I know better...*

*I have picked up the clue you made your boy Nick put in his letter. He says you are a Herbalist with a special interest in the remedies of the Old Testament. I am not a scholar, but my hypnotherapist is also a herbalist. He was once an alchemist in a previous life, and he says that those who still interest themselves in natural remedies are in tune with their previous lives and the ways they used to heal. He has looked at your letter and says that you are not allowed to admit it because you are a bishop, but that your real interest in ancient herbalism is a hint to me of your real feelings and your belief in reincarnation. How long have you known about your previous character? Were you a healer in the Old Testament?...*

*Would you let me have a list of the times and dates and places when you will be having confirmations during May, please. That should stop your boy Nick from interfering in our plot.*

*Yours sincerely*

*Francis Wagstaffe*

The funny thing is that if Bishop John had been born in the time of Guy Fawkes the chances are that he would have been something of a herbalist. In the days before doctors and modern medicines, the parson would have grown herbs in his garden and used them and the leaves of certain shrubs and trees to dispense traditional and natural remedies. And this is not just the stuff of old wives' tales.

Take the leaf of the olive tree for example –native not to this land, of course, but to hotter climes such as the Holy Land. It is still used today and its recognised medicinal properties include its ability to kill pathogens and to reduce cholesterol; it has antioxidant properties that help protect the body including possibly against some cancers.

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In John's great vision in Revelation, at the end of the Bible, the end of all things is pictured as a city which is a place of healing. Notice first that it is a city. The city has come into focus in recent weeks in its role as financial centre. To many, the city is discredited, full of sharks and moneygrabbers that have brought the world's financial systems into crisis. To John the visionary the human city could be a demonic institution. He conjures up the foulest images of Babylon the Great, by which he means Rome, a great monster that wreaks havoc on the earth; he has seen recent evidence of how that city's powers had both crushed the earthly Jerusalem and persecuted and killed many in the infant church. He had also seen how Jerusalem itself had turned on God himself in the person of his Son. He could have been excused for writing the city out of the vision in any positive way and simply going back to the Garden, to a picture of a remembered Paradise. But he doesn't. The end of the Bible, and end of human history, is not the same as the beginning. We do not simply return to where we were; human history is about what we sometimes call civilisation, which means becoming civil, that is, of the city. The city is where we come together as human beings, where we organise ourselves into civil society. The Bible both has a vision of what a demonic and disordered city can become – Babylon – but it also maintains a vision and a hope for a true Jerusalem, a sanctuary of shalom, where God dwells amongst his people.

And where God is, there is life, true life, eternal life and there is salvation and healing (often the same word in the New Testament), the wiping away of tears, the removal of pain and the restoration of creation. The tree of life in John's vision stands at the heart of the city, just as it stood at the heart of the garden in Genesis.

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Now this is not just a vision of the future; this is not just heaven when we die. In John's vision the city comes down from heaven to earth; it touches earth and earth is able to touch heaven. Just as it did when heaven touched earth in the form of a man, Jesus Christ. And when he touched people and people touched him there was healing and when they crucified him on a tree, a tree of death became the tree of life and at the heart of human history was set up a great instrument of healing that continues to bring salvation and healing to a broken world.

The tree of life brings hope to the city and hope to the nations of the earth who are summoned to it to taste its fruit and be healed by its leaves.

Today, in anticipation of the feast of Luke, the Doctor of the Gospel, we offer prayers for healing. In a short while you will have an opportunity to receive or offer prayer for yourselves or for others (or both).

Prayer for healing has long been a part of the life of this church. Every month a prayer group has met at Lorna's to pray for the sick and those in need and individual members of the group prayed consistently, some daily in-between. Two and a half years ago another group within the church had a vision, a God-given vision I believe, for the healing ministry at St Andrew's. The team has committed to coming together for an hour every Monday evening to pray. People have joined them regularly to be prayed for and they have been guided by a number of pictures given to them on several occasions – of a well, a fountain and a very firm stone slab right at the centre of St Andrew's. We have now had several healing services, morning and evening, and prayer is offered and received on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sundays after the morning service, as well as during the Monday prayer time. The current team have all been going at least a year – and anyone is welcome to come and join them on Mondays.

It is led by Pam Lumsden who has a ministry of prayerful listening – with others and to God. From time to time Pam says to me, 'Nick, God has told me this...' Now to be honest I have learnt to be rather suspicious of those who claim to have a direct line to the Almighty. As a Bishop's chaplain I had to deal with not only with the Francis Wagstaffe's but those who wrote to the Bishop with messages from God and they were all, without exception, mad. My job was to write tactful replies. Call it callowness of youth, if you like, but I do believe that God gives visions, whether they be a heavenly Jerusalem with a tree of life or a well or a fountain. One way I test them today is to see if others have a similar vision or picture. So when Pam said to me on Thursday '*God gave me this picture*' – for that's what she says – and went on

*'The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations'*

*A box of leaves that people may take from that they will know what or whom to pray for, also which tree or branch it belongs to in God's Church.*

- I was able to say that Eleanor was already cutting out the leaves for me.

Because God sometimes speaks to the boy Nick too.