

Genesis 1:9-13

9 And God said, 'Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.' And it was so.

10 God called the dry ground 'land', and the gathered waters he called 'seas'. And God saw that it was good.

11 Then God said, 'Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.' And it was so.

12 The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

13 And there was evening, and there was morning – the third day.

John 15:1-17

1 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.

2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

4 Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

5 'I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

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

7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

8 This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

9 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.

10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.

11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

12 My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.

13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.

14 You are my friends if you do what I command.

15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.

17 This is my command: love each other.

Let the land produce vegetation

Genesis 1:9-13; John 15:1-17

11 Then God said, 'Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.' And it was so.

I want to use the tree as the central image to explain the significance of this verse because there's a lot to unpack.

It's a story of a seed and six trees. First we have the seed. And the seed is a bit like the chicken or the egg, because every seed has a complex structure, and seeds are produced from living plants, and yet these seeds, being the first ever seeds, are a bit of a mystery as to how they got there!

And God said let there be seeds. And it was so. To quote from DG McKean's Online Biology Resources: "In the embryo of the seed are all the potentialities of development and growth to a mature plant resembling other members of its species, in almost every detail of leaf shape, cell distribution and flower colour and structure".

The seed contains the DNA of the plant. Made by a God who delights in abundance, so that there are millions of varieties of seed producing millions of different and unique plants.

Enough food for a planet of 7.7 billion people.

And so as it does with water, as we heard last week, the bible returns to trees again and again as it tells God's story.

The First Tree The first tree in the bible is the tree of life. (2:9)

We're not told anything at all about it other than that.

But it would seem to be the symbol of all that is good. Of God's provision and His creativity and generosity. Of the gift of life itself, which God did not need to do, but did anyway and does.

The Second Tree Again there is little information. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But not to be touched. This tree would appear to be dangerous in some way. It has the one and only proviso attached, do *not* eat the fruit. But if we are free agents, rules are there to be broken. And so this tree is the tree which teaches us that we are not gods, and that we would have been better not to have known the difference between good and evil. Or that there was anything other than good. God did not create sin, sin was created by our rebellion, and the result of our rebellion against God as human beings is death. Creation itself is damaged, and we are damaged, because evil has gained a foothold. And we can see this happening all around us.

Trees are complex organisms. We know now that trees communicate with each other. When a giraffe feeds on an acacia tree in the African savannah, the tree sends up ethylene gas as a warning to other trees in the vicinity. And immediately those trees push giraffe-repelling toxins into their leaves, and the giraffes have to move further away.

But in the interests of profit we tear up trees faster than we plant them.

Peter Wohlleben, whose research showed how trees communicate and interact with each other, has also discovered that trees in modern agriculture have lost this ability, due to selective breeding. They've become isolated both above and below ground, and so they're easy prey to insect pests.

The third tree

Isaiah 11:1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. 2 The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—3 and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

So Jesus is the 3rd tree, He is God's response to the problem caused by the second tree which is the problem of sin and evil. So God himself had to come and live as a human being.

Jeus said 5 'I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

This is not about religion, it's nothing to do with observance of rules and tradition. The fruit Jesus speaks about is everything humans do that is good for people and everything that brings healing and growth to everyone to whom he has given life. And this can't be separated from everything that's good for the planet. So if we don't take care of it, it inevitably rebounds on us, because the whole of creation is interdependent. And dependent on God being at the heart of it. But we know better.

Deforestation near to river sources causes more flooding in the long term because trees by their very presence near rivers help to manage the destructive energy of water. Removing trees from flood plains makes even less sense.

If we replace God with our own idols, in this case the profit motive, we bring judgement on ourselves.

The fourth tree

Acts 10:39 'We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree.'

So God came in person, and submitted Himself to the result of our rebellion. Jesus spoke truth to power, but they said he was possessed by a demon and accused him of blasphemy. And the occupying Romans, with the connivance of the religious leaders, hung him on a tree. This was a fatal error on the part of the powers of darkness, because in the next 40 days more than 500 people were witness to Jesus' resurrection. Death was defeated.

The fifth tree

Matthew 13:31 He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. 32 Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

When Jesus started teaching and preaching he repeatedly declared that the kingdom of God was near.

The kingdom of God became a reality when Jesus returned to God after his resurrection. But it started from the activity of one man and 12 disciples in an obscure part of the Middle East. It hasn't yet come to full fruition, but the mustard seed is the image Jesus uses because it is pinhead sized and yet becomes the biggest of the garden plants. We're cheating here a bit because it's strictly speaking not a tree but at its biggest it is big enough for birds to perch in its branches.

And so the kingdom of God is something which sneaks up on you, and you realise it's the greatest kingdom of all. The birds perching in the branches are a prophetic picture of all nationalities coming into the one kingdom.

The sixth tree is also the first tree, the Tree of Life, from Genesis, which reappears in the vision of the city of God in Revelation 22 and whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. The truth is, we live in the time between the two trees. God is bringing everything to fruition, but until he is done (to quote the writer Rob Bell) "we live between the trees, in a world drenched in God. His fingerprints are all over it. Or maybe it's his world and they're our fingerprints". Death has been taken care of. The kingdom of God is here and now. Jesus teaches us to live for today, and without fear, like the person in *Psalms 1:1 Blessed is the one...whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. 3 That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Amen*