

NOTES FROM SOMEWHERE NEAR THE RECTORY

By Toby Garfitt

The beechwoods are a blaze of glory at this time of year. As a forester, my father looked after several wonderful beechwoods on the Chilterns, so I particularly enjoy walks that take me through them.

Trees grow leaves or needles which they regularly shed (even “evergreens”!) in order to produce healthy new growth the following year. They display different kinds of beauty as the seasons change. They communicate and cooperate with other trees around them through an intricate network of mycorrhizal filaments, and they support a huge range of living organisms. They have strong roots so that they can stand tall, and they are remarkably wind-firm. If they do blow over, or are felled, they continue to feed other forms of life, even when they are themselves dead.

Trees can help us to negotiate the storms and stresses of life, and even the painful experience of bereavement. At this time of year we think about All Saints and All Souls, and we observe Remembrance Sunday. We have just held a special Service of Commemoration and Thanksgiving for all three villages, when people have been able to light a candle and remember in prayer those who have died. The life and death of trees can remind us of the bigger picture, of the ecosystem that continues to thrive. And just walking quietly in the woods, or “forest bathing” (shinrin-yoku) as the Japanese call it, has been shown to improve health and well-being.

The “tree of life” appears at the beginning and the end of the Bible (Genesis 2.9, Revelation 22.2), and in the second of these passages the leaves of the tree are said to be “for the healing of the nations”. The wooden cross on which Jesus died is sometimes called “the tree” (Acts 5.30). These references give a deeper meaning to the idea that trees can be good for our souls.

My mother died many years ago, in the middle of November. As I drove away from the care home that afternoon, the trees were silhouetted against a golden sunset sky. I found myself singing the verse of a hymn:

The golden evening brightens in the west;
Soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest:
Sweet is the calm of paradise the blest. Alleluia, alleluia!

As we enjoy the autumn leaves, and as we start to think about setting up a Christmas tree, perhaps we might reflect on the glory of trees and the blessing they can be to us, and on the meaning of the “tree of life”.

The Rector, Simon Cronk, is away