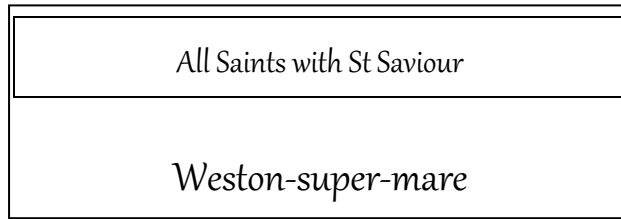




Arms of St Saviour



Arms of All Saints

25th February 2024

Dear friends,

These four Lenten reflections are centred on the Tree of Life. I invite you this Lent to consider trees, or perhaps a single tree; it may be a tree that is in your garden, or one that you can see from your window, or a tree that you walk past on your daily travels. I hope that particular tree will minister grace to you this Lent.

II

In his poem 'Ode on Intimations of Immortality', Wordsworth writes:

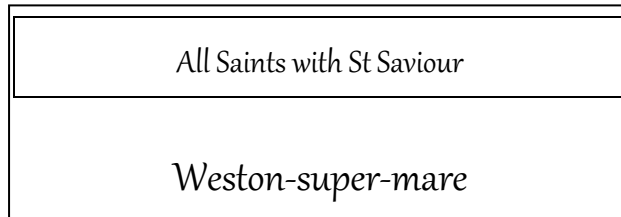
*- But there's a Tree, of many, one
A single field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The Pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?*

William Wordsworth, Ode: Intimations of Immortality IV, 52-57

In the profound parable that is the narrative of the Fall in the book Genesis, we find that there are many trees in the Garden of Eden, but two are singled out. First, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, from which our primal parents ate the forbidden fruit and so lost the life of paradise; and second, there is the tree of life. The idea of a tree of life is common to many religious, philosophical and mythological traditions; it was by no means confined to Judaism; it is a kind of universal human symbol, representing our striving after immortality or fullness of life.



Arms of St Saviour



Arms of All Saints

In the Genesis myth, at first Adam and Eve could eat freely of the tree of life, symbolising their bliss as those who walked in God's Garden. But once they had eaten of the other tree, access to the tree of life is denied.

Genesis 3.22-24

Then the Lord God said, 'See, the man has become like us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever' – therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed a cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

The tree is now a symbol, to quote Wordsworth, of 'something that is gone', of departed glory.

'Where are you?' is God's great cry of dereliction in Genesis 3; God's anguish at his lost children. The tree is, as it were, withdrawn from earth; it is now in the realm of the cherubim. No human being can have access.

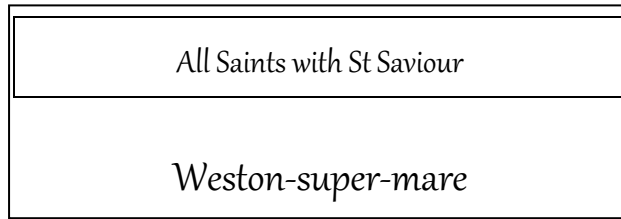
When the Tabernacle (and later the Temple) was constructed to symbolise heavenly realities upon earth, God commanded Moses to fashion the Menorah, the seven branched candle-stand, to be placed in the holy of holies, the place of God's Presence and glory, with the cherubim who over-shadowed the mercy seat, the place of atonement. The Menorah became understood as a depiction of the Tree of Life. Here is a little of Eden restored on earth, but still human access is denied.

He (Moses) also made the lampstand of gold.....There were branches going out on its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of the one side of it and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side of it; three cups shaped like almond blossoms each with calyx and petals, on one branch, and three.....on the other....He made its seven lamps and its snuffers and its trays of pure gold. (Exodus 37.17ff.)

In Lent, we recollect our human condition, our lost innocence, the 'something that is gone' that leads us away from God and his Tree.



Arms of St Saviour



Arms of All Saints

And yet, the Hebrew tradition does not leave us in utter despair. Look at these passages from the book of Proverbs.

She (wisdom) is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy (3.18).

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, but violence takes lives away (11.30).

Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life (13.12).

A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit (15.4)

Those passages encapsulate all that is good and positive and creative in our human living. Wisdom is a tree of life; we are not utterly banished from Eden.

Perhaps the message of the Hebrew Scriptures is that, like Adam and Eve, we have a choice – to eat or not to eat what is forbidden; to think that the Tree of Life is entirely beyond us, and so to wallow in our lost-ness, or to seek by wisdom to embrace it and find it? Wisdom teaches us to embrace it, to seek it. May Lent be for us a growth in holy wisdom.

God our creator,
by your gift
the tree of life was set at the heart of the earthly paradise,
and the bread of life at the heart of your Church:
May we who have been nourished at your table on earth
be transformed by the glory of the Saviour's cross
and enjoy the delights of eternity;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Post Communion prayer for the Second Sunday before Lent

Have a happy and holy Lent!
Fr Brendan