

From rivers and mountains and now into forests, places of great beauty and mystery where many people find solace and solitude, stillness and peace. Here there is time for reflection, time to admire God's handiwork walking among majestic oaks, glorious beech or silver birch. Those special moments in time, that oneness with nature and closeness to God can be found here – golden arrows of light streaking silently from tree tops to rustling leaves around your feet, the swaying emerald green canopy high above, all deeply anchored in a profound silence. Each season brings new delights from the rebirth of spring and carpets of bluebells to the crunching of crisp russet leaves underfoot and silhouettes of naked branches against a blanket of snow.

Yet forests are teeming with life, such treasures for mankind, whether they be the redwood forests of California or the ancient woodlands of the New Forest. The most famous oak tree in the New Forest is the Knightwood Oak, estimated to be 600 years old, a mere youngster compared to the Fortingall Yew in Perthshire now thought to be 5000 years old. Trees are amongst the oldest living things on earth; many were already ancient in the time of Jesus. Many different cultures have sacred woodland groves and there is much folklore wisdom connected with trees and woods that has grown up over hundreds of years.

Many hermits through the centuries have escaped to woods for a solitary and contemplative life. For example, Kevin of Glendalough (Saint Kevin) lived for a while in the sixth century in a hollow tree in the valley of two lakes in Ireland. People visited him for spiritual guidance and eventually a monastic community grew up there. He moved to a cave and later on built a small stone cell in the woods, spending countless hours in solitude. Legend says that he stood for such a long time in prayer with his hand out of the cell window that a blackbird landed on it and began to build a nest, laid her eggs and then fledged her young!

St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153) abbot and author wrote “Believe an expert: you will find something far greater in the woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you that which you cannot learn from the masters”

Charles Darwin wrote in 1839 about his travels on board the Beagle – regarding the forests of Brazil and Tierra del Fuego “Both are temples filled with the various productions of the god of Nature: no one can stand in these solitudes unmoved, and not feel that there is more in man than the mere breath of his body”

John Muir wrote “And into the forest I go, to lose my mind and to find my soul” and “Of all the paths you take in life, make sure a few of them are dirt”

In more recent times, Thomas Merton lived alone in the woods of mid Kentucky. He wrote “I cannot have enough of the hours of silence when nothing happens. When the clouds go by. When the trees say nothing. When the birds sing. I am completely addicted to the realization that just being there is enough, and to add something else is to mess it all up”

Trees are mentioned very many times in the Bible. They were valuable as places of shade, refreshment and meeting. Jesus loved praying in olive groves. The oil was used in the home and for religious purposes. The supplies must have been enormous. In 2 Chronicles 2:10 there is a record of Solomon bringing the servants of King Hiram of Tyre 20,000 baths full of olive oil. When trees stopped producing fruit they would be used for fuel. The best olive wood would be used for ornate

carving. It was used in Solomon's Temple for door posts which were carved with palm trees, flowers and angels.

We are told in Genesis that God planted a garden in Eden where he placed the man he had formed.

"Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil"

Christ was crucified on a tree and out of this came new hope and the promise of eternal life

In Revelations, John saw trees in his vision of the Heavenly City. He saw trees as a symbol of God's benevolence " On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit , producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations"

I was interested to read a quote from John Evelyn in a lecture to the Royal society in 1662 how "trees and woods have twice saved the whole world; first by the Ark, then by the Cross; making full amends for the evil fruit of the tree of paradise, by that which was borne of the tree in Golgotha" He went on to argue how "all intelligent persons have embraced the solace of shady arbours and all devout persons found how naturally they dispose our spirits to religious contemplations"

Today we are more aware of the huge importance of trees than probably even fifty years ago especially with the climate change crisis. They are a vital part of our eco system, taking in carbon dioxide and putting out oxygen. They help keep the air clean and protect us from extreme weather. Their roots help prevent flooding and soil erosion. They provide nutrients for the soil , shelter and food for all kinds of wildlife. We are more aware of the plight of the Amazon Rain Forest and have seen the dreadful consequences of forest fires in all quarters of the globe. Forests are precious and God's gift to man. Perhaps we could all pray for their safe keeping and protection from exploitation moving forward. Let us praise and thank God for His Creation, for the forests and everything living in them. We could think about planting more trees ourselves and maybe even hugging one!