

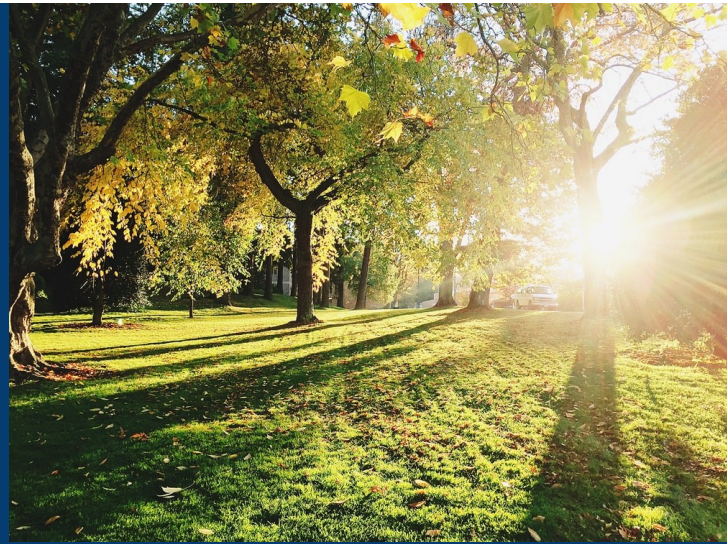
# Resources for Churches...

## Responding to the Coronavirus

### Consider the Trees

#### **Tree**

Deep roots thrusting down and wide  
Pushing past the clutter of time  
Beyond leaf litter,  
Dirt, rock and whatever else  
Drinking deep of hidden water  
Tall branches sprouting high and wide  
Stretching upwards towards the warmth of the sun  
Higher than the walls,  
Shrubs, foxes and whatever else  
Drinking deep of brightest sunlight.  
Heart deeply rooted and wide  
Reaching out into the Father's embrace  
A love beyond understanding,  
Time, space and whatever else  
Drinking deep of God's living streams.    By Chris Matthews



**Jeremiah 17: 7-8**

**Psalms 1: 1-3**

Like many people across the country, Robin and I now have evolved a standard route for our daily walk: out of the house, round to the ship canal, down the disused canal path to the river, round the large park at the end and back. The quickest way home is to cut across the A5061, but I prefer the slightly longer one through the park, mainly because we pass my favourite tree. It is only a young tree - a maple - but in the spring it had beautiful yellow foliage which shone in the sun and brightened our spirits. Now it is fuller and greener, but I still love to take a look and check it's doing ok. There's just something about it which speaks of life and flourishing and goodness.

Trees also have a special place in the Bible. Unlike the UK, with all its parks and lush countryside, in many parts of the Middle East trees were scarce. In the dry season, the further south and east in Palestine, the hotter the summer months were. Working out in the open or being out in the sunshine became unbearable, so the shade of a tree was especially valued. Trees therefore become symbols of nature's goodness and life force, and of God's provision and blessing. Trees are there at the beginning in the creation story, in the narrative and psalms and words of prophets, and are there at the end producing supernaturally abundant fruit and leaves which bring the world healing (Rev 22:2). Psalm 92:12 states: The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. These were trees renowned for being tall and majestic, strong and firm, symbols of resilience and security in adversity. In Jeremiah 17:7-8 we read: Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.

# Resources for Churches...

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In the spring we thought about dandelions and how their resilience to harsh conditions is attributable to the robust nature of their roots. The three months of lockdown were stretching out before us and we were looking for biblical encouragement from which to draw strength. Now that we are facing the likelihood of a long winter of further restriction and incarceration, devoid of the possibility of meeting for worship, it's worth our revisiting the concept of resilience, and where we can find security in adversity, and to think about how we can not only survive in harsh conditions but also thrive.

Jeremiah hits the nail on the head (17:7-8). What we need in times of uncertainty, hardship and ongoing stress, like in years of drought, is trust and confidence. Through him, God gives us this picture of a well-rooted tree. A tree that is planted by a stream can continue to flourish and be fruitful, not only through the dry season but also through times of extended drought. In the same way, putting our trust in God and putting down our roots deep into him can mean that even in the harshest of times we can draw strength and nourishment to sustain us, so we continue to grow and bear fruit for the blessing of others.

In the world of trees, the dryer the climate and the poorer the soil, the longer and deeper the tree roots grow. Survival and flourishing is about having roots that are substantial enough to reach the underground source of water and nourishment. Trees develop resilience to long periods of drought through being adaptable and responding to adversity by growing more beneath the surface. So when we hear God likening us to trees, we need to take note. Blessed is the one ... whose delight is in the law of the Lord, who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree, planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither (Psalm 1:1-3). The connection between putting down roots and drawing nourishment and strength from God is clear.

In this time of pandemic, many things have dried up. We feel starved of normality, of the company of others, and of corporate worship, to name but three. It has become a time of struggle and pain, uncertainty and doubt. But God's words to us through Jeremiah bring a promise. Although all that we can see might be parched ground, provision is there, hidden from view, deep underground. When we access it by putting down deeper roots, we can receive all we need for flourishing and growth. As God promises his people in Hosea 14:8 - your fruitfulness comes from me.

We need also to notice that Jeremiah talks not only of sending out roots but of being in the best place. Both Jeremiah 17:7-8 and Psalm 1:1-3 speak of being planted by streams of water. Some experts in Hebrew say that the word planted in Psalm 1:3 carries with it the sense of being transplanted or replanted. A tree that has been moved to a location with far better growing conditions. This infers that our ability to be resilient and to grow tall, strong and firm is influenced by where we choose to stand. For us too there are well-watered, fertile places, and those in which we will fail to thrive. These might include being rooted in the past, being rooted in social media or celebrity culture, being rooted in the world of horoscopes or the world of the press and political commentators; or even being rooted in the opinion of the last person we spoke to. From where we seek nourishment is important. Times of drought and change in climate will still come, but the promise is that we can thrive and flourish in them if we position ourselves in a life-giving place.

***Read Jeremiah 17:7-8 and Psalm 1:1-3 again a few times.***

At this time when we are not able to meet together in our church building for worship and teaching, and we can no longer rely on someone else feeding and watering us each week, the onus falls back on us to send out our roots to where water and nourishment can be found.

What are the spiritual sources you are delving into just now?

Are they helping you to flourish and bear fruit or do you need to reach out further for what you need?

Consider whether you are currently planted by streams of water or whether you need repositioning.

Bearing in mind what Jesus said about his Spirit being a spring of living water welling up to eternal life (John 4:14) - are you in the place where you are being continually refilled with the Holy Spirit's gift of abundant life, or is it time to relocate?



# Resources for Churches...

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Whenever we have a hot spell of weather, all the advice is to drink plenty. The living water is there, but are you drinking enough? Is it being drawn up through your roots so it circulates round your whole self and keeping you well hydrated or are you getting increasingly depleted in strength or trust or hope?

Are there any unhelpful habits you have shifted into in the past few months which mean your roots are reaching down into soil which is not fertile and nourishing? Ask yourself: On what is my mind focussing? Who am I listening to? What am I looking at? Do they help me grow? Where would be a better place?

Psalm 1 speaks of delighting in the law of the Lord (v2). However, this is not talking about sticking to a list of rules and regulations. When the Old Testament uses the word 'law' (torah), it is in the sense of teaching and instruction in God's will and ways. The invitation is to a love of reading God's word, and chewing it over in our minds, so it helps us to know ourselves better and to relate to God and those around us more meaningfully (see also Joshua 1:8). By doing this, we store up in our hearts the wisdom and understanding we need for living life in God's way, just as tree roots store food to nourish the whole tree.

How could you build into your life more time to mull over scripture so it reaches into your soul and shapes the way you think and live? For the next week, select a verse from Jeremiah 17:7-8 or Psalm 1:1-3 and keep it in your mind, repeating it slowly to yourself and allowing God to teach you new things through it.

A colleague observed this week that the time she had spent as a missionary in Africa was the time she grew the most, because everything she had previously relied on was taken away. Think about ways in which you might reach your roots into streams of living water. What healthy habits could you adopt which help cultivate your resilience?

Could you experiment with a more meditative Bible reading pattern? Instead of just reading through once or twice, read slowly, repeatedly and prayerfully so that things previously unnoticed come to your attention and get that sense of drawing out deeper meaning.

Could you choose a bible verse to dwell on for a whole day or a whole week, noticing the connections you begin to make with things that happen and conversations you have?

Could you try incorporating the words of the scriptures you read into your prayers?

Could you try using new forms of prayer, such as circling prayers, breathing prayers or a labyrinth?

How could the practice of meditating on God's word day and night be worked out in your life? Would it mean establishing a better weekly rhythm, or a daily rhythm with times of prayer at set points of the day, such as that in the Northumbria Community's Daily Office, or something different?

What fruit in your life could you imagine being produced as a result?

Jeremiah 17:7-8 makes the link between having trust and confidence in God and having no worries in a year of drought. If you find yourself feeling anxiety or doubt, what strength can you draw from this image of a tree? Can you think of any other ways the lessons you learn from considering trees might be incorporated into the way you live?

**Read again the opening poem.** How does it help you reimagine what life could be like in the months ahead? What have you learned from Jeremiah 17:7-8 and Psalm 1:1-3 about trust and confidence in God?

Paul encourages the believers in Colossae: And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him. Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness (Colossians 2:6-7).

Turn these words into a prayer for yourself, other members of our church and the wider church, that these coming months would indeed be a time when we flourish and grow and bear much fruit.