

Tree of Life

A Christian growth course from the Diocese of Sheffield

Guidance for group leaders is included in italics; these are suggestions, not directions – please use your own judgement in your situation.

Introduction

The Bible's various writers ignite our imaginations by painting pictures on our minds with their words. They sometimes present God's message in vivid images that can puzzle, excite and inspire us. One of the recurring pictures is of trees: a familiar, ordinary sight for many of us, yet something God can use to speak to us about our lives as Christians.

In Scripture, we hear that God's precious wisdom 'is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her' (Proverbs 3:18). In order to make sense of our life and to receive God's life, we need to hear and receive God's wisdom. In this course we explore five biblical images of trees and see how they help us go deeper in our faith, our worship and our daily living as followers of Jesus.

The course is designed for use in small groups, so that we can discover wisdom together, through each other. It could also be used on your own, individually.

Each session involves exploring two Bible passages, with most time given to the first one and the second one reinforcing the first.

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### Course Outline

#### Session 1: The Flourishing Tree

**Psalm 1 (+ John 15:1-11)**

*Key question: What does a healthy, flourishing human life look like?*

*Key ideas: We need to be rooted and nourished in order to be healthy. We draw on the life of God, through God's teaching, particularly taking delight in our scriptures. As we remain in relationship with Christ, we become fruitful.*

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Session 2: God's Growing Kingdom

Matthew 13:31-32 (+ Ezekiel 31:1-14)

Key question: What does God's kingdom look like?

Key ideas: In Jesus, God's reign has arrived and is now growing in a mysterious, gradual, irresistible and wonderful way. This kingdom is different from the world's ways of doing things. We witness to God's kingdom, showing that we are part of it through our words and actions.

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### **Session 3: The Tree of Death which Gives Life**

**Acts 10:34-43 (+ Deuteronomy 21:22-23)**

*Key question: Why is Jesus death on the cross so important to us?*

*Key ideas: In Jesus' death and resurrection, God takes our sin upon himself, in order to give us new life. Our response is to gratefully receive God's forgiveness and testify to others about what Christ has done.*

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Session 4: Being Part of God's Creation

Psalm 148:7-12 (+ Rev 22:1-5)

Key question: Are trees and the rest of creation simply there for our benefit?

Key ideas: All of God's creation matters; all of it is to give glory to God. We are part of that creation, playing our role in it, but not separate from it. Our ultimate future is not in a disembodied heaven, but life in a renewed, healed creation.

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### **Session 5: Trees that Continue to Bear Fruit**

**Psalm 92:12-14 (+ Galatians 5:22-25)**

*Key question: What does God want to do in us and through us from now on?*

*Key ideas: Our mission is to keep growing and to produce fruit, which brings nourishment and delight to others and results in new life. The Holy Spirit grows these fruits in us gradually, all the way through our lives.*

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### Session 1: The Flourishing Tree

#### Psalm 1 (+ John 15:1-11)

*Key question: What does a healthy, flourishing human life look like?*

*Key ideas: We need to be rooted and nourished in order to be healthy. We draw on the life of God, through God's teaching, particularly taking delight in our scriptures. As we remain in relationship with Christ, we become fruitful.*

*In this opening session, you may want to give some time at the beginning to let people introduce themselves, particularly if they do not all know each other.*

#### Stories (suggested time: about 5 minutes)

Can you think of someone you admired and perhaps wanted to be like when you were younger? It might be someone well known, or little known; in your family, church or in the wider world. What was it about this person that impressed you? Talk about it with one or two other people. *Discuss in twos or threes.*

#### Word (about 35 minutes)

##### Read Psalm 1; then reread verses 2-3.

The Psalms regularly encourage us to follow the way of 'the righteous'. This does not mean people who are perfect – none of us get close to that. Nor should we be self-righteous – an ugly attitude, which we need to watch out for and turn away from. In the Psalms, 'the righteous' means those who are committed to doing right - to understanding and following God's path in life. These are the people this psalm wants us to admire and become like.

To help and inspire us, this psalm pictures such a person as being like a tree.

- What do you notice about this tree that interests or attracts you? How might that inspire us to live? *Listen to people's responses and discuss before going any further.*

The tree in this psalm has become well rooted – a process that takes time. It is well nourished because it is close to a life-giving source which remains constant – streams of water. This keeps it healthy and enables it to grow.

The source of nourishment for us which the psalmist points to is God's 'torah' – which means 'instruction' or 'direction', sometimes translated 'law'. This is given by 'the LORD' (literally Yahweh) the God of Israel, who begins and continues a friendship with human beings which is a committed, covenant relationship. To enable that relationship to continue and flourish, God has spoken, giving us instruction; as Christians we find this especially in the Old and New Testaments.

- Have you ever experienced the Bible as a delight and nourishing, like a refreshing drink of water? Perhaps reading it on your own, or in a group with others, or in a larger gathering through preaching, liturgy or drama? If so, share a little about that and how it impacted you. *Share in plenary or in groups of two or three.*

Understanding the Bible is not always easy; sometimes it can be a struggle. Yet the promise here is that God's teaching always nourishes us, even if we are not aware of it doing so - like a stream continually soaking the soil in which the tree grows.

We find that nourishment particularly by giving careful attention to God's instruction and doing so regularly ('meditate day and night', v2). This requires some time and discipline.

- Think about your own regular pattern of life. Can you find a way to give some more careful attention to God's word – and perhaps in the seasons that follow it? *Think in silence for a minute.*

Picture language always has limitations, which we need to recognise; for example, trees do not deliberately decide where they plant themselves. But we can! Let's choose wisely, by the streams of water.

Jesus also chose to use picture language in his teaching, often involving plants and trees. Here is a famous example:

### **Read John 15:1-11**

Jesus knew his scriptures (our Old Testament). From them he takes the image of God's people Israel as a vine and adapts it – emphasising himself as the source of life for his followers. Jesus is the new Israel, the one on whom divine favour rests; so God's people need to be connected to him.

Notice the repeated challenge to 'remain' ('abide') in the vine – that is, to stay connected to Jesus and draw on the life that he gives, like a branch drawing the sap it needs from the trunk of the tree. In Jesus the divine word became flesh (John 1:14); in our relationship with Jesus we find and receive God's life-giving word, which nourishes us. We are continually dependant on our connection with Jesus, submitting to him and finding joy as we do so.

When talking about the vine, Jesus repeatedly emphasises that it has a purpose: to bear fruit. Hold onto this key idea for now: we will explore it more fully in our final session.

## **Reflection (about 3 minutes)**

Take a moment to remember what we have thought about during this session. Is there one particular thing that stands out for you – your ‘best bit’? If so, pray into that in silence. Does it lead you to some action? If so, you might like to write that down so you remember it later. *Silent reflection*

## **Branching Out (about 6 or 12 minutes)**

This section is not essential, but offers something a bit different which can enrich our learning. If time allows, you could look at this together as a group; or else come back to it later on your own, after the meeting has ended.

‘The Bible Project’ produces videos which help us understand the Bible (and are available free, with donations welcome). If you are able to access the internet, try watching one or both of these:

[Psalm 1 \(bibleproject.com\)](https://www.bibleproject.com/psalm-1)

[Tree of Life \(Theme Video\) | Explore It's Meaning in the Bible \(bibleproject.com\)](https://www.bibleproject.com/tree-of-life)

## **Prayer and Worship (about 10 minutes)**

When Psalm 1 encourages meditating on God’s teaching, the word literally means ‘speaks’ or ‘murmurs’. So to close our reflection on scripture, let’s speak aloud some verses which are very similar to those in Psalm 1, but these are found in Jeremiah 17:7-8

*Read, preferably all together (using the same translation!) Jeremiah 17:7-8. Let this lead into a time of prayer and worship together.*

Jeremiah 17

<sup>7</sup> Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,  
whose trust is the LORD.  
<sup>8</sup> They shall be like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream.  
It shall not fear when heat comes,  
and its leaves shall stay green;  
in the year of drought it is not anxious,  
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

(New Revised Standard Version)

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### Session 2: God's Growing Kingdom

#### Matthew 13:31-32 (+ Ezekiel 31:1-14)

*Key question: What does God's kingdom look like?*

*Key ideas: In Jesus, God's reign has arrived and is now growing in a mysterious, gradual, irresistible and wonderful way. This kingdom is different from the world's ways of doing things. We witness to God's kingdom, showing that we are part of it through our words and actions.*

#### Stories (about 5-10 minutes)

Can you think of something that started out very small but eventually grew big and significant, perhaps surprising some people? You might think of a plant or garden; a group or church; an idea, a project. Or you might think of your own journey of faith, how your relationship with God has grown over time. If you can think of something like this, did it grow quickly or slowly? What do you think caused the growth?

*Talk in twos or threes.*

#### Word (about 35 minutes)

##### Read Matthew 13:31-32

From small acorns, huge oak trees grow; large plants and bushes arise from tiny seeds. Jesus draws on that familiar miracle of growth throughout this chapter of Matthew's gospel, in a series of short stories (parables). These stories of growth are to help people glimpse the heart of his message and mission: God's rule or 'kingdom'.

Right from the start, Jesus proclaimed this kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15), or kingdom of heaven as Matthew puts it. But what does Jesus mean by this?

A kingdom is where a monarch (king or queen) is the overall ruler. So in God's kingdom, God is in charge. Through his words and actions, Jesus proclaims that God is the ruler, reclaiming dominion in this world and in our everyday lives.

- How do you react to this image of God as the king, the ruler who is in charge here and now? Does it make you feel puzzled? Alarmed?

Excited? Doubtful? Or something else? *Share your thoughts in twos or threes.*

In the gospels, Jesus declares that God's kingdom has arrived in himself: it is here and now! Yet he also tells his followers to pray 'your kingdom come' (Matthew 6:10) – indicating that the kingdom is not yet fully here but more is still to come. So we should expect signs of a God-ruled world here and now – with some of those signs seen in our own actions, as God inspires, prompts and works through us. Yet at the same time we also sense a world ignoring or rebelling against God, so we lament and we long for God's rule to be seen, fulfilled and completed.

In the short parable of the mustard seed which we have read, Jesus sheds more light on God's kingdom.

- What do you notice in this parable? How does it help us understand more about God's kingdom? *Talk in twos, then share all together.*

In this story we see a plant that grows. What is the growth of God's kingdom like?

- It is a hidden and mysterious process, which we cannot fully understand – so humility is required: we don't have all the answers.
- It is a slow, gradual process - so patience is required! We long for more, now, but sometimes have to wait.
- Yet this growth is a wonderful, amazingly powerful force, irresistible. In due time, growth and then harvest will come! So we marvel, rejoice, give thanks and worship.
- There is transformation as the seed changes. It seemed so tiny and insignificant – yet becomes a plant and eventually a great tree which is a blessing and a home to a whole mixture of God's creatures. So we find our place in God's great tree and share the tree with others.
- Trees are alive and life-giving, in so many ways. We know today that they hold together the soil needed to grow our crops and feed our animals. They clean the air and produce the oxygen we breathe; without that, we would all die. They offer shelter, food, protection. As God's people living today in God's kingdom, we are called to be life-giving – enabling others to live and to find life in all its fulness.

Jesus and his audience knew that mustard seeds normally grow into bushes, which are rarely more than ten feet tall. But to make his point more vividly, Jesus depicted this seed growing into a huge tree. He seems to be drawing on pictures used by prophets such as Daniel and Ezekiel when they speak about human kingdoms and empires.

### **Read Ezekiel 31:1-14**

- According to Ezekiel, what can go wrong with earthly kingdoms, such as Egypt in his day and before it Assyria? What are the dominant attitudes and how does this compare with the Kingdom of God? *Ask the group for a few responses, see what they notice in the passage.*

Another way to talk about the rule or kingdom of God is to say 'Jesus is Lord', as Paul does (Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11). If we accept that someone else is Lord, then we submit to them and agree that we are not in charge. Yet sometimes we find letting go of our desire to be in control difficult.

- Why is this often so difficult for us? *Talk in twos or threes, then share and discuss with the group.*

In our next session, we shall see how Jesus is a different kind of lord from what the world might expect: a humble king, who comes riding on a donkey, not a war horse (Matthew 21:5), on his way to death on a cross.

## **Reflection (about 3 minutes)**

Take a moment to remember what we have thought about during this session. Is there one particular thing that stands out for you – your 'best bit'? If so, pray into that in silence. Does it lead you to some action? If so, you might like to write that down so you remember it later. *Silent reflection*

## **Branching Out (about 7 minutes)**

This section is not essential, but offers something a bit different which can enrich our learning. If time allows, you could use this together as a group; or else come back to it later on your own, after the meeting has ended.

When you look at your own experience of life and at the wider world around you, do you tend to see life as 'a glass half empty' – or perhaps 'a glass half full'? Here is a song/prayer by the Welsh songwriter Martyn Joseph, which you might like to reflect on and also sing along. Who do you think the singer is speaking to? Does the song give us clues about how God's kingdom is seen and grows in our world?

[This Glass \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

[[ Include a link to the lyrics of This Glass – can be found here <https://songsforthecominghome.wordpress.com/2019/01/27/this-glass/> ]]

## **Prayer and Worship (about 10-15 minutes)**

*Include the words from Jeremiah 17:7-8 again, either at the beginning or the end of a time of prayer and worship together.*

In what ways do you want Jesus to become Lord more fully in your own life? In the life of your local community? In the life of your local church?

In the coming week, how might we witness to God's kingdom, giving people a glimpse of God's ways of doing things and a taste of God's life-giving grace?

*Share and pray in threes*



## Jeremiah 17

<sup>7</sup> Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,  
whose trust is the LORD.

<sup>8</sup> They shall be like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream.

It shall not fear when heat comes,  
and its leaves shall stay green;  
in the year of drought it is not anxious,  
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

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### Session 3: The Tree of Death which Gives Life

#### Acts 10:34-43 (+ Deuteronomy 21:22-23)

*Key question: Why is Jesus death on the cross so important to us?*

*Key ideas: In Jesus' death and resurrection, God takes our sin upon himself, in order to give us new life. Our response is to gratefully receive God's forgiveness and testify to others about all that Christ has done.*

#### Stories (about 5-10 minutes)

'Can you tell me what you believe - what is most important and precious to you about your faith - in just a few words, just one sentence?'

Imagine a good friend asking you this question, just as their bus home is about to leave. You only have a few moments in which to respond! What will you say?

*Discuss in pairs*

#### Word (about 35 minutes)

##### Read Acts 10:34-43

Peter is asked to explain what he understands and believes about God and he does so (in more than one sentence!). Perhaps he said a bit more than this and Luke is giving us a summary.

- What do you notice in what Peter shares? Which of his words particularly ring true to you and make you want to say 'amen'? Does anything Peter says surprise or puzzle you?

*Share responses together as a group.*

Peter is speaking to a particular group he has never met before: the family, household and friends of a Roman centurion called Cornelius. This godly foreigner explains how he heard God speaking to him and telling him to send for Peter (Acts 10:1-8). Peter listens to Cornelius' story, so that he can understand more. Only after that does he speak, responding to what he has heard.

- Do we sometimes need to explain our faith in slightly different ways to different people? How much does listening to them first help?

*Ask the group for any examples of when this has happened in their experience.*

At the heart of the good news which Peter shares is the 'tree' on which Jesus was executed (Acts 10:39). The New Testament writers sometimes refer to the cross on which Jesus died in this way (Acts 5:30; 13:29; Galatians 3:13; 1 Peter 2:24). Perhaps they choose this image of a tree to remind people of what is said in the Old Testament:

### **Read Deuteronomy 21:22-23**

Deuteronomy describes how the body of a criminal, executed for a very serious crime, would then be displayed in disgrace on a tree or wooden pole. This gave people the message that this person was 'under God's curse'.

- How can this disturbing picture help us understand what happened when Jesus, who was innocent of any crime, died on the cross?

*Share responses together as a group.*

The early Christians believed that Jesus' death on the cross spoke about the curse of God (Galatians 3:13-14). God, being holy and totally good, rejects all wrongdoing; so God condemns human sin and our rebellion against God. In Jesus, God has come to us and freely chosen to take this rejection on himself - so that we can be saved from it and instead receive God's blessing. This is strange and shocking and wonderful!

Christ's death on the cross is a mystery which we will never fully understand. It has been said that the cross is like a precious, wonderful diamond with various different facets (faces), each of which reflects the light in a particular way. The New Testament writers describe the significance of Jesus death on the cross in various different ways, including these:

*You might ask different people to read each verse.*

- ❖ opening the way to God (Mark 15:37-38);
- ❖ a demonstration of the love of God (John 15:13);
- ❖ establishing a covenant relationship with God (Matthew 26:27-28);
- ❖ a ransom, buying the freedom of slaves or prisoners (Mark 10:45);
- ❖ a victory over the destructive forces of evil (Colossians 2:13-15);
- ❖ putting right what the first human (Adam) got wrong, so that we can be right with God (Romans 5:18-19);
- ❖ a substitute in our place, who reconciles us to God (2 Corinthians 5:19, 21);
- ❖ God offering himself as an atoning sacrifice that cancels our sin (1 John 2:1-2).

- Which of these pictures of what Jesus achieved on the cross makes most sense to you? What do you value about that picture? Is there one you are less familiar with, or one you find puzzling?

*Discuss this in smaller groups of three or four, or else all together. People may need to see this list (above), to remind them of the different ideas mentioned.*

Whichever of these makes most sense to us, we need to notice the outcome of Jesus death, which Peter proclaims: forgiveness of sins, offered to all who believe in Christ (Acts 10:43).

Together with Jesus' death, Peter proclaims his resurrection (Acts 10:40-41). Jesus was raised from death, confirming that the cross was a triumph, not a defeat – and that the power of sin and death was defeated. The cross, this tree of death, led on to new life for Jesus Christ; and it becomes a tree of life for us, as we place our trust in the risen Christ as our Lord, who brings us peace (Acts 10:36).

## **Reflection (about 3 minutes)**

Take a moment to remember what we have thought about during this session. Is there one particular thing that stands out for you – your 'best bit'? If so, pray into that in silence. Does it lead you to some action? If so, you might like to write that down so you remember it later. *Silent reflection*

If you would like to, share your 'best bit' of this session with others from our two dioceses through our Tree of Life WhatsApp group. Then see what others have learned and posted there.

## **Branching Out (about 5 minutes)**

Here are some further resources you may find helpful. You might use the first one as part of a time of prayer and worship. The second one is a longer poem, something to read after you finish the session.

The cross has always fired the imaginations of poets and songwriters. Here is a passage from an African song many hundreds of years old (its exact origins are not known).

The cross is the way of the lost.  
The cross is the staff of the lame.  
The cross is the guide of the blind.  
The cross is the strength of the weak.  
The cross is the hope of the hopeless.  
The cross is the freedom of slaves.  
The cross is the water of the seeds.  
The cross is the consolation of the bonded labourers.  
The cross is the source of those who seek water.  
The cross is the cloth of the naked.

Quoted by Janet Hodgson, *Making the Sign of the Cross* (London: Canterbury Press, 2010), p.40.

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One of the earliest poems we have in the English language (at least 1300 years old) is called 'The Dream of the Rood'. In this dream, the unknown poet sees a beautiful tree, which turns out to be the cross ('rood', in old English). The cross tells the story of how it experienced Christ's death. You can read it in a modern translation here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/159129/dream-of-the-rood-translation> There may be some parts of the poem which we find hard to understand. But it can give us a strong sense of how Christians have treasured the cross of Jesus from the earliest times.

Prayer and Worship (about 10-15 minutes)

Include the words from Jeremiah 17:7-8 again, either at the beginning or the end of a time of prayer and worship together.

Remember and give thanks for people who have shared the good news of Jesus with you, in ways that have changed your life.

Pray for a few people with whom you would like to share the good news of Jesus. Pray for yourself, for opportunities to listen and speak. Pray that the Holy Spirit will prompt them to respond, as happened when Peter was speaking (Acts 10:44).

Spend some time giving thanks and praise for the wonderful mystery of Jesus' death on the cross and all that it means for us.

Pray together in groups of three or four.

Jeremiah 17

⁷ Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,
whose trust is the LORD.

⁸ They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.

It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

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Session 4: Being Part of God's Creation

Psalm 148 (+ Revelation 22:1-5)

Key question: Are trees and the rest of creation simply there for our benefit?

Key ideas: All of God's creation matters; all of it is to give glory to God. We are part of that creation, playing our role in it, but not separate from it. Our ultimate future is not in a disembodied heaven, but life in a renewed, healed creation.

Story (about 5-10 minutes)

Have you ever had a favourite tree or group of trees? Perhaps one you climbed as a child, or sat under on a hot day; or one you pick fruit from today, or admire its colours during different seasons? What is it you most appreciate about the tree(s)? *Discuss in threes.*

Word (about 35 minutes)

Up to now in this course we have seen trees as pictures which help us understand other things – how to live a good life, what God's kingdom is like, Jesus' death on the cross. In this session, we think more about physical trees, the ones we can see and touch and shelter under in our daily life. Do they matter? Are trees and other parts of creation simply there for our benefit? How should we relate to the physical world around us?

- Have you ever sung as part of a large congregation, or a community choir, or perhaps a football crowd? What was the experience like? How much were you aware of those around you?

Share a few brief responses together as a group.

Read Psalm 148

In Psalm 148, we can see God's creation as a kind of community choir, all proclaiming God's praises (notice how often the word 'all' is repeated). Did you spot the trees in there among the crowd (verse 9)? Humans are there too – but they are only one part of this community and they don't appear until near the end (verses 11-12).

- Does this picture of the whole creation praising God surprise you?

- Humans are involved in this great chorus of praise – but we see them simply alongside the rest of creation, not leading or directing the worship of other creatures. Does this surprise you?
Discuss as a group together.

How can trees praise God?! Perhaps as they rustle or roar when the wind blows through their leaves? Or as they silently wave their branches? Clearly words are not essential for praising God (Psalm 19:1-4). Or perhaps this is metaphor (picture language) telling us that all creatures give praise to God simply by being themselves and fulfilling their God-given roles in creation.

As humans, we easily become obsessed with ourselves. As we look out at the wider creation which we are part of, we can regain perspective and learn respect for the rest of creation. Trees, for example, can be so useful for us, some providing fruit to eat and firewood, others wood for building houses, fences and boats, making desks, boxes or paper. Trees also provide cooling shade, reduce loss of water and soil, store carbon, clean the air, provide a home for plants, insects, birds and other animals, can be beautiful and awe-inspiring to look at – and they produce the oxygen we all need to survive. Trees are amazing! So let's admire and value them, with a sense of wonder, even as we also make good use of them. They are not things that belong to us; they are part of the community of creation, to which we also belong. In many ways, we and they depend on each other.

The first human was told to cultivate and care for God's garden (Genesis 2:15). The role God gave humans within the creation included 'dominion' (Genesis 1:28). As those made in God's image, humans are given a responsibility to develop and look after God's creation in God's way, using our power in the way God uses power.

- What does it mean for us to show what God is like in the way we use our power? You might think about how Jesus used his power. How will this affect the way we treat other people – and other parts of God's creation, as we cultivate and care for God's garden? *Discuss this in groups of three or four.*

The Bible begins in a garden (Eden); it ends in a garden city (New Jerusalem). It does not speak of human souls leaving their bodies behind and going up to some heaven in the clouds. Instead, it shows heaven coming down to earth – to restore and heal the earth and all of God's creation (Revelation 21:1-3). The existing creation will be transformed and renewed, but not replaced.

Read Revelation 22:1-5

In this vision of renewed creation, we see reminders of that first garden in Eden: light, flowing water and the tree of life. This tree now grows along both banks of the river and produces abundant food (imagine a fruit tree which gives a crop not just once each year, but every month!). Its leaves have healing properties so powerful that they can heal all people and all the scars of this world. In this garden city, God's life-giving presence is at the centre; and we humans do not replace the natural world, but live in harmony with it.

This is the future that God will bring about. As we move towards it, we work with God now, in our daily lives, to give glimpses, foretastes of that wonderful future. We will think more about this next time, in our final session.

Reflection (about 3 minutes)

Take a moment to remember what we have thought about during this session. Is there one particular thing that stands out for you – your ‘best bit’? If so, pray into that in silence. Does it lead you to some action? If so, you might like to write that down so you remember it later. *Silent reflection*

If you would like to, share your ‘best bit’ of this session with others from our two dioceses through our Tree of Life WhatsApp group. Then see what others have learned and posted there.

Branching Out (about 7 minutes)

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The Communion Forest is a global initiative among Anglican churches. It involves local activities of forest protection, tree growing and eco-system restoration to safeguard God’s creation. For stories from churches across the world and ideas about how to become involved, see www.communionforest.org

Other good initiatives focused on treasuring God’s creation (the Fifth Mark of Mission in our worldwide Anglican Communion) can be found here: <https://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/resources/> and here: [Season of Creation](#)

Prayer and Worship (about 10-15 minutes)

Include the words from Jeremiah 17:7-8 again, either at the beginning or the end of a time of prayer and worship together.

Jeremiah 17

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(New Revised Standard Version)

Read Revelation 5:13. Give thanks for that great choir of creation, with ‘every creature’ joining in the worship of God. Add your voice to that choir again!

Here is a prayer you might use:

God, creator of the universe,
Fill us with your love for the creation,
for the natural world around us,
for the earth from which we come
and to which we will return.

Awake in us energy to work for your world;
let us never fall into complacency, ignorance,
or being overwhelmed by the task before us.
Help us to restore, remake, renew.

Amen

(Anne Richards, www.ctbi.org.uk)

Pray for those you know who farm or fish or work in forestry. Give thanks for their hard work in providing food and other resources for their communities. Pray for them in making decisions about how to handle God's creation wisely in a complex and changing world. Think of ways you might encourage and support them when they are under pressure.

Tree of Life

A Christian growth course from the Diocese of Sheffield

Guidance for group leaders is included in italics; these are suggestions, not directions – please use your own judgement in your situation.

Session 5: Trees that Continue to Bear Fruit

Galatians 5:16-26 (+ Psalm 92:12-15)

Key question: What does God want to do in us and through us from now on?

Key ideas: Our mission is to keep growing and to produce fruit, which brings nourishment and delight to others and results in new life. The Holy Spirit grows these fruits in us gradually, all the way through our lives.

Story (about 5-10 minutes)

Think of someone who has helped you mature and grow in your life and especially in your faith. What was it about that person that has helped you so much?

Reflect on your own; then discuss in threes

Word (about 35 minutes)

So far in this course we have thought about

- our place in the wider community of God's creation, as we worship God and cultivate and care for God's garden;
- the message of good news which we share with others, particularly about Jesus' death for us on the cross;
- the life-giving kingdom which God is growing in this world and our part in revealing that kingdom.
- In our first session we saw a picture of how God wants us to live: like well-rooted, fruitful trees that drink in the nourishing waters of God's teaching; like a vine drawing life from Jesus and producing much fruit.

So what does it mean to bear good fruit? What does it look like in our lives and in our world today?

Read Galatians 5:16-26

When we explore the work of God the Holy Spirit in our lives, some people get very interested in the gifts of the Spirit, such as prophecy, healing, leadership, which Paul lists in other letters. But here in Galatians, Paul invites us to focus on something different: the fruit of the Spirit.

We are called to 'live by the Spirit'. The Holy Spirit empowers us to change, to turn our backs on 'the desires of the flesh' - not our physical bodies but our selfish, sinful nature, the part of us which inclines towards destructive ways of living. Instead, the Holy Spirit works with us to develop God-like attitudes which then shape our actions. As we commit ourselves to Jesus Christ, then walk day by day with Christ, we are gradually changed: the life of God, the character of Christ grows in us! Paul gives some examples relevant to his audience in the divided churches of Galatia.

re-read verses 22-23

- Can you choose one of these qualities (fruit) which you find especially delightful and attractive? Perhaps you can tell a story about how you have experienced it through other people. What impact did that make on you?

Share a few of these stories together as a group.

Sometimes we struggle to notice God's fruit developing in our own lives – but may notice it in someone else's life. So it can be helpful to tell them about the good things we notice God doing in them: it may bring encouragement. It can also be good to have brothers and sisters in church who know us and are able to tell us what they notice God doing in our lives. What they see might surprise us!

Fruit is something normal: it's what you expect to find on a healthy fruit tree. It grows slowly, gradually; patience and perseverance are needed! It is attractive, so that other creatures are drawn to it and want to taste it. It is life-giving: to the one that eats it and also in spreading the seed inside it, enabling more of this kind of fruit tree to take root and grow. Then the new trees in turn will provide even more life-giving fruit.

- Think about your own life today and also the life of your church(es). What is proving fruitful – producing God's life, perhaps in spite of your own sense of weakness? Give thanks for that. Are there ways in which you would like to become more fruitful – perhaps in your family, work, church or local community?

Discuss this in threes.

It is God who produces this fruit, working in us with grace through the Holy Spirit – not our own efforts. Yet we do not simply sit back and wait for it to happen: we have an active role to play (Galatians 5:16, 25-26).

- How do we hold these two truths together? Do they both ring true in your own experience?

Discuss in threes, or all together.

Read Psalm 92:12-15

We end, as we began in our first session, with godly people pictured as trees – like impressive, upright, strong cedars; or like welcoming, nourishing date palms. They flourish as they stay close to God (Psalm 92:12-13).

Trees can live for a very long time. However long we ourselves may live, we are called to continue producing fruit as we stay close to God and keep drawing on the life of God. As we do that, we are promised that we can continue to flourish and be fruitful, right to the end of our lives (Psalm 92:14).

Reflection (about 3 minutes)

Take a moment to remember what we have thought about during this session. Is there one particular thing that stands out for you – your ‘best bit’? If so, pray into that in silence. Does it lead you to some action? If so, you might like to write that down so you remember it later. *Silent reflection*

If you would like to, share your ‘best bit’ of this session with others from our two dioceses through our Tree of Life WhatsApp group. Then see what others have learned and posted there.

Branching Out (about 7 minutes)

This section is not essential, but offers something a bit different which can enrich our learning. If time allows, you could use this together as a group; or else come back to it later on your own, after the meeting has ended.

The Menorah

The menorah is a lampstand, traditionally with seven oil lamps, more recently with nine lamps or candles. Its shape and description, involving branches, buds, blossoms and flowers (Exodus 25:31-40) suggests a bush or tree. This tree brings light, to enable people to worship God and as a witness to God’s holy presence. The menorah has become a widely used symbol of Judaism.

You might like to think about physical things which help us experience and express our faith – such as water, oil, bread and wine; crosses, candles, badges, flowers. Which of these do you find particularly helpful? Is there one you would like to explore more?

Does your name have a particular meaning?

Polycarp seems to have learned his faith from Jesus’ friend John and eventually became Bishop of Smyrna (in Asia Minor). Polycarp was killed in the middle of the second century AD by the Roman authorities, for refusing to offer worship to their Emperor. He inspired many people, by the way he lived his daily life, the message he preached and particularly his courage as he faced death. He lived up to his name, which means ‘much fruit’!

Here is the Collect (special prayer) for St Polycarp’s day, 23rd February. It is a challenging one for us to pray!

Almighty God,
who gave to your servant Polycarp
boldness to confess the name of our Saviour Jesus Christ before the rulers of
this world
and courage to die for his faith:
grant that we also may be ready
to give an answer for the faith that is in us
and to suffer gladly for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Prayer and Worship (about 10-15 minutes)

Include the words from Jeremiah 17:7-8 again, either at the beginning or the end of a time of prayer and worship together.

Pray together in threes.

Think of someone who continued to bear good fruit to the end of their life. Give thanks for their life and what you learned and received from them.

Think of someone you can encourage by telling them how you see them bearing fruit for God today. Pray for an opportunity to do this.

Pray for the church(es) you are part of, giving thanks for the ways they are producing fruit and praying for areas where more of God's fruit is needed.

Jeremiah 17

⁷ Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,
whose trust is the LORD.

⁸ They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.

It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

(New Revised Standard Version)