

The 17th Sunday after Trinity (second service)
Harvest Thanksgiving Sunday
St Thomas, Salisbury, 2023

Ezekiel 37:15-28
1 John 2:22-29

I don't know whether I am surprised, or reassured, or both, by the extraordinary outpouring of emotion following the apparent vandalism and destruction of the Sycamore Gap tree. You can't have failed to have followed the coverage one way or the other this week of the apparent felling in the middle of the night of the 300 year old sycamore tree, English tree of the year in 2016, and immortalised in the film Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves.

And I admit to feeling pretty sick, and pretty angry, myself watching the coverage. What would possess somebody, how broken and sick, or desperate for attention, does somebody need to be, to kill a perfectly innocent, well loved, centuries old tree that is doing no one any harm, and indeed is doing nothing other than growing and being beautiful? That it happened at the season of harvest seems haunting. That it is an overt and specific example of something that actually is happening all across the world all the time on an enormous scale to our seas, forests, and glaciers has also been pointed out repeatedly by commentators since Thursday.

Our two lessons this evening are about unity and brokenness. We hear words of the prophet Ezekiel, using that metaphor of two separated sticks, think of them as a tree trunk split in half, one representing Judah and one representing Israel, the two kingdoms that were divided, and then, one after the next, conquered and occupied as the nation of the children of Israel slowly collapsed - these two nations are represented by two

separate pieces of wood which are put back together again, united into a single piece. And Ezekiel uses this image, this metaphor, as a parable for the way in which God will bring all the fractured and broken bits of community back together. And of course while we can read that in a historical sense, and there is certainly biblical witness to part of that restoration, we of course also read it very much as a promise of the final culmination, the moment when all peoples and nations will be gathered together into the wonderful and eternal kingdom of God.

And our second reading is a warning about division. About the moments, the times when we are more interested in separating the sticks, on felling the tree, and throwing the pieces as far as we can in opposite directions, rather than uniting them, allowing ourselves to be united. So there's a warning about being watchful against that, and then a reminder that actually the key to unity, the key to harmony, is abiding in Christ. We read: "and now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence."

Although these aren't readings specifically set for harvest, there's enough in Scripture that reminds us that two things are true both at the same time: first of all creation is in a state of waiting, vandalized, broken, 'groaning', as St Paul has it. And it is part of our work to tend that imperfect creation, and our meagre offerings can be a part of green shoots growing from an apparently dead trunk.

But also that the hints and guesses that we see now in the astonishing beauty of our world, are foretastes and harbingers of the perfect beauty, the perfect unity, that is the new creation being brought to perfection in Jesus Christ.