



“We are nurtured by deep roots, as far back as Abraham and Sarah; we reach upwards to the heavens while standing firmly on the ground; and when we do all this right, we produce fruits that benefit the world - namely our good deeds.” (www.judaism.about.com)

Introduction

This reflection sheet for Christians takes its inspiration from a minor Jewish feast: *Tu B'Shevat*, the New Year for Trees.

What's that about? Briefly...

At one level:

- *Tu B'Shevat* is a festival celebrating the ‘birthday’ of trees and their fruits;
- Originating in agricultural and tithing practices in ancient Israel;
- A celebration of the gift of creation;
- Looking forward to the spring (northern hemisphere) as seeds swell with hidden life and prepare to burst forth with fruit.

At another level:

- A reminder of our call to spiritual growth. Lives with roots deep in God's Word bear the fruit of good deeds;
- A call to ecological responsibility;
- Symbol of the hope of salvation after the suffering of exile.

A reflection on trees, seeds, fruits and spiritual growth

Symbols

Prepare a simple arrangement of fruits (with seeds) and a green branch.

Opening reflection

Access to the enjoyment of the beauties of nature—meadows full of flowers, majestic mountains, flowing rivers—strengthens us in service to God. For all these contribute to the spiritual development of even the holiest of people. (Rabbi Abraham ben Maimonides).

Pause. Silence, as we prepare to listen to God's Word.

Scripture

Jeremiah 17:7-8: But I will bless the person who puts his trust in me. He is like a tree growing near a stream and sending out roots to the water. It is not afraid when hot weather comes, because its leaves stay green; it has no worries when there is no rain; it keeps on bearing fruit.

Luke 13:18-29: Jesus asked: ‘What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it with? It is like this. A man takes a mustard seed and plants it in his field. The plant grows and it becomes a tree, and the birds make their nests in its branches.’

Pause. Silence, as we ponder God's Word.

Sharing

- In what way is the tree a symbol of your life as a son/daughter of God, as a disciple of Jesus? E.g.,
- Think of your family tree, and your faith family tree reaching right back to Abraham & Sarah. For what/whom are you most grateful at this moment?
- Share a point of growth in your faith life. Is your life currently about sowing seeds? Sprouting new shoots? Bearing fruit? Drawing close to a stream? Surviving a drought?

Additional points for reflection

The Jewish sages discussed the question: *Why is Torah (God's Word/teachings) compared to the fig tree?* Discuss this question in the light of the following:

1) You cannot pick all the figs at once, but only gradually, over a long season. Similarly, you cannot learn the whole Torah at once, but only gradually, little by little, over an entire lifetime.

(Midrash Numbers Rabbah 12,9; 21,15)

2) Whenever you go to the fig tree, you are likely to find ripe fruit to eat. Similarly, when you go to the Torah, you will find nourishment for the spirit. (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 54a,b)

Recall a time when you turned to Scripture and drew strength, nourishment, life.

A blessing from Jewish tradition

Over Fruit that Grows on Trees
Blessed are you, Lord our God, sovereign of the universe, who has created the fruit of the tree.

A blessing from Catholic tradition

For the Sprouting Seed
To you, O Lord, we pray: bless the sprouting seed, strengthen it in the gentle movement of soft winds, refresh it with the dew of heaven, and let it grow to full maturity for the good of body and soul.

A parish prayer

Lord God, bless our lives, and the life of our parish. May we be fertile ground for the seed of your love to be sown and to grow to fullness. May we rise up like a sturdy tree, sinking roots deeply into the gift of your Word and into the gift of your people. O Lord, may we never be afraid to grow.