

18th May 2021

Trees

"You will find something more in woods than in books.

**Trees and stones will teach you that which
you can never learn from your masters."**

St Bernard of Clairvaux, Epistles No. 106

The folk in our local church have planted a new tree in the church garden, an *Amelanchia*, which has star-shaped flowers in the Spring and berries later in the year. It's been planted as a memorial to all the people who have died in the past fifteen months, not just because of Covid, but those whose deaths have left us all with lasting grief and unfinished mourning.

Trees – and stones too, according to St Bernard of Clairvaux – can teach us things we can never learn from our masters. Walking on the Isle of Skye some years ago, I climbed from a beach to an uncultivated tract of land at the top of a cliff, uncultivated, that is, apart from several random Rowan trees. As I got closer, I could see the tops of ruined walls just rising above the peat and heather, but delineated clearly enough to show that this had once been the site of a little village, cleared, perhaps, as crofters moved south for work in the towns or as victims of "The Highland Clearances". What looked like moorland had once been a living settlement. And the trees? Centuries ago, a Rowan tree was planted by every house, for good fortune, to ward off evil spirits and protect a family from danger. Wherever there was a home there was a Rowan tree.

While the homes and people had gone, the trees remained as my teachers. There were so few trees on that clifftop they couldn't be described as a wood, such as Bernard of Clairvaux would have had in mind. And yet they too spoke of something more than could be found in books – of memories, connections to the past, the sharing of community, hardship and love, life and history, birth and death, tears and laughter in an island settlement – even something profoundly spiritual.

The *Amelanchia* in my church grounds will be our teacher too, for it will keep on telling the stories of people we've known and loved, more than any book ever could, for generations yet to come. Thanks be to God.

A prayer for today

Lord, when I listen to the lesson of the trees, I hear about rootedness and spreading branches, strength and watchfulness. Thank you for their message. Amen