

# GROWING Together

12th Series

## THE GOSPEL OF THE TREES

(A Multifaith Perspective)

*"They who plant a tree are servants of God,  
They provide a kindness for many generations,  
And faces that they have not seen shall bless them."*<sup>1</sup>

### TREE-PLANTERS

#### EDEN

Tree-planting has a glorious history. The Lord God was the first tree-planter: "Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food" (Gen. 2:9). To our first parents was given the task of caring for these trees.

#### ISRAEL

The people of Israel, coming out of the desert, were encouraged to be tree-planters: "When you come into the land and plant all manner of trees..." (Lev. 19:23). The message was again taken to heart in this century when the people of Israel returned to an arid ancient homeland. Now millions of trees in Israel are helping to make the desert bloom.

#### U.S.A.

One tree-planter who has become a legend is Johnny Appleseed, in real life John Chapman (1774-1845). He tramped the northern United States with Bible in one hand and apple seeds in the other. His Christianity motivated him to a life of service. He preached "good news" as he planted good deeds.

#### WORLD

Another tree-planter, surely one of the greatest of all time, is Dr. Richard St. Barbe Baker (1889-1982). Born in England, he planted his first two trees at age four. In 1909 he came to Saskatoon for university studies and the adventure of homesteading at nearby Beaver Creek. From books, and especially from the spirituality of his aboriginal neighbours, he learned much about the interrelatedness of all things. But it was also in Saskatchewan that he first witnessed clearcutting and soil erosion. Concerned with a deteriorating environment he resolved to struggle for a green earth and for a spiritually sensitive humanity.

As a professional forester his work began in Kenya. In 1922 from among the Kikuyu tribe he organized an international society, "The Men of the Trees." Trees became the tool to combat the enemy, the ever-encroaching desert. His success in Kenya gave shape to his vision of a green world. Tirelessly he travelled the globe inspiring others. He campaigned to save the California redwoods, to reforest the Holy Land, to halt the spread of the Sahara Desert and of the American dustbowl by planting shelterbelts. In New Zealand he developed the world's largest planted forest. Through his influence billions of trees have been planted worldwide, lives healed, and communities enriched.

In 1982 Baker arranged to be in Saskatoon to celebrate World Environment Day, June 5. With a group of children, the 92 year-old planted a tree. It was his last. Four days later he died, and Saskatoon became the last resting place of this world citizen.



### A SACRED ACT

Baker considered planting trees a sacred act, an affirmation of our future, a responsibility to our children. He found his spiritual home in the Baha'i faith whose founder, Baha'u'llah (1817-1892), preached the oneness of God, religions, humanity, and world. Baha'i teachings reinforced Baker's concern for the earth and for the physical and spiritual welfare of its inhabitants. He prayed often:

*"... that I may be just to the Earth beneath my feet,  
to the neighbour by my side,  
and to the light that comes from above and within;  
that this wonderful world of ours may be a little more beautiful  
and happy for my having lived in it."*<sup>2</sup>

#### REFERENCES:

- <sup>1</sup> Van Dyke, Henry. "The Friendly Trees" (Adapted for inclusive language). The Home Book of Quotations, Classical and Modern, 10th edition. Burton Stevenson, Ed. Dodd, Mead and Co., New York. 1967.
- <sup>2</sup> Gridley, Karen, ed. Man of the Trees. Selected Writings of Richard St. Barbe Baker. Ecology Action, Willits, CA. 1989.

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Gathering the Family of Jesus

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