

## **Sermon 23 July 2017: Romans 8:12-25 and Matthew 13:24-30,36-43**

### **The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds.**

If you are a cycling fan you will know that Chris Froome is pretty much guaranteed to win his fourth (and his third successive) Tour de France this afternoon. An article in Cycling Today published earlier this summer describes him as having dignity and politeness and being a role model for clean cycling in a sport that has needed one. Just as the Tour de France was gaining a mass audience in this country, so it trashed its credibility with a series of drugs scandals. Chris Groome is reputed to be clean, and perhaps a bit of an outsider, someone who doesn't try to fit in or follow the crowd. Maybe, if the Tour is a field of wheat and weeds, he is wheat.

This parable of the wheat and the weeds is one of patience, of allowing God control. It is a simple straightforward story and it begs the obvious question (maybe one which will be included in the Autumn event of questions) a question about the horrific evil actions we see around us: 'why doesn't God do something?', 'why is God silent, why doesn't he step in and stop it?' Yet God seems to wait, looking out over His world, waiting for the harvest, when the wheat will be separated from the weeds.

And Paul in the letter to the Romans describes creation as being held back, waiting until all creation and all human beings are ready, a waiting game, while the Holy Spirit, which is already at work in us, at work in the world, completes the task of full renewal.

So why can't the weeds be simply pulled up, why can't God step in and stop whatever atrocity is being committed? Greek scholars tell us that the weeds Jesus was referring to are a particular type of weed, known as 'darnel' which is a nasty wheat lookalike with poisonous seeds and roots like nylon cord which twine around the roots of wheat. If pulled up, they will pull up the wheat as well.

And so we live with pain, the pain that is in the world, the pain that is in the church, waiting for God to harvest.

We can see strung up around church the marks of this terms Horizon service – in the flags of the nations of the world. We can read about the beauty, variety, humanity and pain and suffering in each of those nations in the atlases and books in the south aisle. We are called to share the pain and the hope of every part of God's creation and we are to be in prayer at precisely that place where the world is in pain. Paul tells us that it is part of our calling, and we do that as we read and watch the news and imagine ourselves in other peoples' shoes.

We also see it closer to home, in the pain we inflict on others or hold closely to ourselves. When we are selfish, inhospitable or simply fail to see another's point of view. In the way we don't acknowledge fear or failure, either as individuals or as a collective group. And which then, unacknowledged, grows, festers and hinders our growth. These things are our weeds. Sam Wells, writing in a Nazareth Manifesto, suggests that we should openly accept them, recognise them, claim them. Not try to pull them up or try to cover them up, or pretend failure or hurt didn't happen, but to make it part of our story. Not as an excuse, but so that brought out into the open we can acknowledge, forgive and grow.

I've been very fortunate: my father was a lovely man. Yesterday when talking to my mother, she was remembering a time when she had scolded him about something and she said, 'of course, if he had been perfect, he wouldn't have been a person'. I don't want us to be frightened of the fact that we are not perfect. But I also don't want us to be frightened of the imperfections we encounter in others. Our imperfections are what make us human.

Jesus makes clear that we simply cannot be certain who is "in" or who is "out." What is my position in this grand struggle between good and evil? Am I a passive spectator, an armchair critic, a mere consumer who cares only about my own well-being? Or do I work along-side God, as he labours to proclaim and spread his kingdom of truth, justice and peace?

One of Iain and Anna McColl's favourite bands is Harry Bird and The Rubber Wellies. And they have a beautiful song entitled Dirty Hands. It's about integrity, speaking out, and not turning a blind eye. This is hard stuff. A pair of dirty hands implies hard work, of getting down to the business at hand and seeing it through. The chorus is "**Well, there's only one thing I want, when my time on this Earth ends, a pair of dirty hands, O Lord, and a clean conscience.**"

I think that's what we would all want. But how does not turning a blind eye to injustice; to speaking up for ethical investment even if it means less reward; for refusing to accept that child homelessness is just part of 21<sup>st</sup> century society, how does that fit with this picture that Jesus seems to paint of passivity in the face all these weeds, in the face of evil?

Barbara Brown Taylor writing in Bread of Angels suggests that in asking us to tolerate a mixed field, God is not calling us to passivity, but instead to strenuous activity. She says: 'our job, in a mixed field, is not to give ourselves to the enemy by devoting all our energy to the destruction of the weeds, but to mind our own business so to speak – our business being the reconciliation of the world to God through the practice of unshielded love. If we give ourselves to that, God will take care of the rest – the harvest, the reapers, the fire – all of it. Our job is to be wheat, to go on bearing witness to the one who planed us among those who seem to have been planted by someone else'.

Another way of putting it is that we can leave the weeding to the angels, and get on with the mission Jesus has given us -- proclaiming the *good* news of the kingdom of God drawing near.

Amen

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