

Proper 11 Year A 2020

For the second Sunday in a row, we have a parable about seeds – last week the parable of the sower, today ‘the parable of the weeds in the field’, agricultural stories which would have resonated with those listening to Jesus. We not only have the story, we have the explanation too. And once again we have the thorny question – who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’; who is ‘us’ and who is ‘them’; who is ‘wheat’ and who is ‘weed’. Important questions for the Jewish Christian community for whom Matthew was writing towards the end of the first century AD (probably 80-90 AD) in Antioch. Just like the church in Rome to whom Paul sent his letter, the church in Antioch (originally Jewish Christians fleeing persecution in Jerusalem) was now facing growing ethnic and social diversity. With the promise of the growth anticipated at the end of the parable of the sower – ‘yielding, in one case a hundred fold, in another sixty, and in another thirty’ – the question emerged – ‘how are we to deal with those who join us but turn out to be not exactly like us?’. A relevant question for today. Look how we have struggled with race, women’s ministry, with homosexuality, and coming up, with transgender rights.

If no weed had been sown, the field would have been ‘pure’, but Jesus wasn’t into purity – he left that to the Pharisees. He ate with ‘tax-collectors and sinners’, he welcomed, forgave and healed prostitutes, the blind and lame, people of other faiths and ethnicity; he put up with his fickle disciples who were quick to condemn others but so fallible themselves. Like the owner of the field, Jesus sowed good seed but knew that

inevitably weeds would pop up, too. So perhaps ‘the field’ is not the world (in spite of verse 38), perhaps ‘the field’ is the believing community, which in spite of itself has members aren’t as good, as faithful, as they could or should be. Or even more fearful, perhaps the field is me – or you! I have said before that although I have signed up for duty I don’t always get things right, sometimes get things wrong, and sometimes take the easy way out. Well, if we are honest, don’t we all? And don’t we dislike the ‘holier than thou’ attitude of the people who think they are really ‘in’ or ‘us’? Patience, patience.

Let them grow together – after all it is not the servants of the field owner who will bring in the harvest, but the reapers. We are not to decide who is in and who is out – God will see to that – we are not being invited to take part in a witch hunt.

BUT does that mean that we should turn a blind eye to evil because ‘God will decide’. Of course not. If we are to bring forth the harvest of the kingdom envisaged in the parable of the sower, we need to be active in service, confident that (sometimes despite appearances) God is acting in our midst and will continue to act into the future. Just think of the upsurge in community spirit and helpfulness during this pandemic, the willingness to comply not only with the law but also with guide lines, the search for the common good – and compare that with some other countries where lock-down has been seen as an assault against ‘rights’ – what happened to responsibility or community? Individuality and self-sufficiency (not of the ‘Good Life’ type but of the economic and social kind) has been something

which we have been encouraged to value, and those who aren't 'self-sufficient' we have been encouraged to condemn – skivers and shirkers.

But in the reading from Isaiah we learn of the only one who is self-sufficient. 'I am the first and I am the last; beside me there is no God.

There is no other rock'. We are not self-sufficient – but neither are we voiceless. God says 'You are my witnesses'. 'Do not fear and do not be afraid'. It is a call to arms – in the fight against poverty, discrimination, inequality, racism, climate change

In God's field wheat is growing as well as the weeds, and God is encouraging us 'Do not fear and do not be afraid', to work for the coming of the kingdom, quietly, patiently, sometimes vociferously, with hope.

I have a suggestion to make. Calculate how much money you have saved by not going to the barbers or hairdressers over the last four months, write a cheque for that amount and send it to the DEC, Doctors without Borders, Christian Aid or whatever. And yes, I have done that, I posted the cheque this morning to Embrace the Middle East. That will be like the owner of the field sowing good seed, and in spite of the weeds, bringing in a harvest.

You are God's witnesses, the seed He has sown, the beginning of the harvest of the kingdom.