

Reflection for 19 July 2020 – The Sixth Sunday After Trinity (Proper 11)

Rev Canon Chris Stone

Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

The Parable of Weeds among the Wheat

²⁴ Jesus put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" ²⁸ He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" ²⁹ But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."

Jesus Explains the Parable of the Weeds

³⁶ Then Jesus left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.' ³⁷ He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸ the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴² and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Reflection

Next Saturday – 25th July – is the Feast of St James in the Church's calendar and I well remember arriving in Santiago de Compostela fifteen years ago, completing my camino, collecting my '*compostela*' and worshipping in the cathedral on the eve of that special day. In the evening, with a crowd of goodness knows how many other thousands of people, we crammed into the Praca do Obradoiro for the firework display, with the front of the cathedral as the most impressive backdrop to one of the noisiest, most jubilant and most spectacular shows we'd ever seen, before or since.

My name is Chris Stone and with Carol, my wife, we were due to be in Santiago last week and this as members of the Anglican chaplaincy team based in the city centre and worshipping at the church of Sta Susana on the hill in the Alameda Park. Like the 'smaller and safer' celebrations of the Feast of St James this year, it's because of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic that, sadly, we've not been able to travel but it's good to share these words from afar and to assure you that you are in our thoughts and prayers.

The Gospel reading for today features a crowd, at least to start with - a crowd listening to Jesus and the parables he's sharing with them, 'earthly stories with a heavenly meaning'. I can imagine myself there with those in the crowd as Jesus '*puts before them* another parable'. In the original language of the Bible the same

word is used as for serving a meal, and so Jesus 'serves the people' food for their minds and for their souls.

What they heard, though, may have puzzled them, irked them or even made for indigestion.

It's the story of the farmer whose enemy sows weeds among the planted wheat. That's a very vengeful enemy, one who knows that the weeds will look almost like the wheat as they grow, making it next to impossible to gather the weeds without pulling up the wheat as well - and it would leave at least some of the weeds despite every best effort. The master tells his servants to leave the job of separating the two until the harvest and that's what happens, even though it would cost time and money... and patience.

What is the meaning of that parable? There's no mention of how the crowd understands it, but Jesus' disciples, including James, want an explanation. Now back in the quiet of 'the house', they ask Jesus. As he starts to dwell on the details of what he's said, he describes how the different elements of the story relate to the 'kingdom of heaven'. It's the Son of Man, Jesus himself, who sows the seed and it's the devil, literally the accuser or slanderer, who with evil intent disrupts the regular rhythm of the planting, nurturing, growth and harvest of the wheat by introducing the weeds. The good seed are the 'children of the kingdom' and the weeds are the 'children of the evil one'. At the end of the age, and only then, Jesus explains, the reckoning will come and the evil and the righteous will reap their just deserts.

Many further explanations have been offered by scholars over the centuries but all agree this is a parable of sharp contrasts. There is evil and there is good – them and us. How does this parable leave you feeling? How do you respond to the different characters and to the story itself? As we seek to understand for ourselves, with the help of the Holy Spirit, it's important to exercise caution, remembering that it is God who is judge, and not us. Our perspective is not God's perspective and God's thoughts are not our thoughts.

Last weekend, we visited Canterbury, where St Augustine established himself after travelling to England on a mission from Rome. It was Pope Gregory who sent Abbot Augustine together with his forty companions in the year 597 off on their journey to Kent to convert Æthelberht, King of Kent, whose wife, Bertha of Kent, was a Frankish princess and practising Christian. It was near Canterbury that Augustine first met Æthelberht, a spot marked today by a stone cross. Æthelberht allowed Augustine to preach freely in Canterbury but the question came up about how to treat existing temples and religious practices. In a letter sent by Pope Gregory to Abbot Mellitus, who was to join Augustine – a letter known only through Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People – the advice was, in essence, to adapt and build bridges, and not simply condemn what existed, avoiding unnecessary confrontation.

It seems to me as I consider this parable and the others that go alongside it, that there's a personal aspect to it. It's more than a story in which we are no more than an observer; it's a story in which we have our part. It offers an invitation to reflect on our own lives and our own attitudes to others both inside and outside the church.

For many who follow the way of the '*camino*' - of the Christian faith or not – 'slow' travel offers the time and the space to think and reflect and pray more intensely. That was my experience - I was able to record a reflection at the start of each day, for example - and many of the books I've read share experiences of the amazing things that have happened to the writer on the '*camino*'.

All of us get things wrong in our lives – be it in our judgments or in other ways – but the message of the Gospel is that the way to God’s love is never closed. His arms are open to welcome, and I think of the parable that Jesus told about the ‘lost son’ as it’s recorded in Luke’s Gospel. The father doesn’t wait for his son to reach home but goes out to meet him running - considered undignified for someone in his position - and with the hem of his garment hitched up, There is always a way back to him, and in walking that road it may be that we need to forgive or to know the forgiveness of others, or even to learn to forgive ourselves.

Later in Matthew’s Gospel, St James is there and his brother, St John, travelling with Jesus as they approach Jerusalem. In company with them is their mother. ‘Can one of these sit at your right hand in your kingdom, and the other at your left?’ ‘Can you drink from my cup?’ asks Jesus? ‘We can’, these two disciples, among the closest to Jesus, reply. ‘Yes, you will, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not for me to grant. Those places are for whom they have been prepared by my Father.’ Hearing this exchange, the other disciples – rushing to judgment perhaps – are indignant with the two brothers. Jesus goes on to explain that those who want to become great must be as servants to others, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. This is Jesus’ way. This is the way to which God calls.

From my time – all too short – on the ‘*camino*’, I can look back at my notes and I see that the moments that impressed most were those when we met with generous and thoughtful acts. It didn’t matter who we were or why we were walking, the companionship, the welcome and the hospitality – no questions asked – were offered without judgment and without discrimination.

It’s a reminder to me that Jesus’ call is to action as well as to words. It’s impossible to know the richness of the ‘*camino*’ by watching a film about it, or learning about it from books. It’s only in the act of walking that the walk can be fully experienced, and the pilgrimage lived.

St Francis of Assisi highlighted the importance of deeds as well as words – of walking the talk – when he’s recorded as saying that a Christian calling is to, ‘...preach the gospel always; if necessary, use words’

As the time of Jesus’ death approaches, his teaching continues unabated. Picturing the sheep and the goats, he speaks of those who find their place with God. They are those who respond by visiting, by feeding, by welcoming, by clothing, by caring when they see the prisoner, and when they notice the hungry, the stranger, the naked and the sick. They do not judge; they act in response to need.

Finally, as I look forward to St James’ Day, it’s a chance to remember, too, all those who have taken action and walked with the backpack called ‘*la niña*’ along the ‘*camino*’ as a way of remembering and paying tribute to victims of the coronavirus. The relay that left Roncesvalles on 19th June is less than a week away from its arrival in Santiago next Friday.

A Prayer

Heavenly Father,
in parables, Jesus opens up the kingdom of heaven.
Help us, we pray, to read and learn,
to think and to pray,
to experience and to act,
that we may come to know you more and more,
and to live our lives closer to you and for you. Amen

The Collect for Trinity 6

Merciful God,
you have prepared for those who love you
such good things as pass our understanding:
pour into our hearts such love toward you
that we, loving you in all things and above all things,
may obtain your promises,
which exceed all that we can desire;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.