

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 19th July 2020 – 6th Sunday after Trinity

Isaiah 44.6-8; Romans 8.12-25; Matthew 13.24–30, 36–43

Mum, why did God make wasps? You could call that the English picnic question. And the truth is there is no simple real answer. And why stop at wasps? What about ticks or mosquitoes? What about cancer? What about viruses? Why did God create a world where such things can happen, and cause such suffering? Why is nature not perfect? There are many answers, most of which are evasive and unsatisfactory.

One of them is to say there isn't really a God at all, which one way of making the question go away. Another is to say well if God is so incompetent, why should we vote for him anyway?! Sadly, understandably, but unnecessarily, these are often reasons why people lose faith or reject faith, as they struggle with the realities of pain and suffering. Yet for others, somehow the experience of struggling with such things only strengthens their faith. One of the keys by the way, is actually that it's ok to get angry with God, and complain to God. He can take it, you know.

Theologically, all this is called the problem of pain, and for countless people it is by no means merely a theological problem. Our readings from the Bible this morning offer several explanations. St Paul likens the problem of pain to the pain of giving birth, with Creation itself groaning in travail, as Creation grows towards becoming the Kingdom of God. It's quite an engaging idea, on one hand not denying the realities of pain, and on the other hand offering hope for future new life, and with the idea that somehow the pain can be life-giving.

Our Gospel reading has one of the parables that supposedly has a ready-made, allegorical interpretation. That's always a bit odd because parabolic teaching is not meant to be like that. What our Gospel reading really contains, is to begin with a first-rate parable, and then secondly a separate allegory based on it. The thing is that they don't really belong together, and they actually make more sense when considered separately.

The parable of the weeds comes first, and it poses the question, where do all the weeds come from? If it has always been God's purpose to build his Kingdom on earth, why let the weeds grow at all? The parable addresses the human urge to rip up the weeds whatever damage that may do, and you could observe that this is what many totalitarian regimes try to do. Or it's what people often resort to doing in their lives, by abandoning something unsatisfactory rather than living with it. The parable suggests that living with the weeds can often be better. That's quite a profound observation.

But the parable of the weeds goes on to affirm that ultimately the weeds do not survive, and that the thing about heaven is that the weeds are no more. That's rather good news for gardeners! One thing to note is that the burning of the weeds is not about punishment or vengeance; it's just about permanently destroying what is not good. But it is important that this is God's work, not humankind's. There is no hint here of the weeping and gnashing of teeth that the subsequent allegory rather relishes.

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When you encounter these pairings of parables and allegories in the gospels, the important thing to do is to listen really well to the initial parable, to dwell on it and let it speak to you first, rather than seizing on the allegory as the only significant meaning. They are essentially separate things, and each of them has a different thing to say. It's interesting to note that the allegories are often more judgemental, perhaps reflecting Jesus' irritation that his dim disciples needed to have an explanation of the parable in the first place!

The allegorical second part of the gospel reading reflects more the struggles of the early church, against persecution, and against people who are undermining the Church from within. Whereas the original parable is more generally about the problem of pain in Creation. Why does God let bad things happen? The answers that help us today are all rooted in the parable of the weeds.

Firstly, the parable teaches that God has sown good seed in good ground. In all your struggles, learn not to doubt this. One of the fundamental Christian affirmations is that God has created a good universe. It's what Genesis Chapter One is really saying. And God saw that it was good, including humankind. Lots of consequences flow from this.

Secondly, the parable teaches that although evil has entered Creation, it will not ultimately prevail. So do not lose hope; do not lose hope. This is also part of what St Paul was teaching in our first reading. A vital part of being a Christian is maintaining hope in God's good purposes, whatever happens, however difficult the journey, and the promise of heaven is a vital part of this.

Thirdly, do not fall into the false duality of thinking nature good, people bad. It's much more complex than that. There is good and bad in both. Indeed you can even say that the evil in people is simply a consequence of the evil in nature. That actually fits rather well with the principles of evolution.

Fourthly, ultimately humanity needs to be rescued from the weeds, and this is what Jesus came to do. To rescue us from the weeds which are within ourselves and around us, to assure us of the deep goodness planted within and around us. Jesus helps us live with the weeds for the time being, and even to grow through them. And to give us the sure hope of a weed free heaven.

There is much to unpack in all of this, but ultimately the message is, do not despair; do not lose hope. With Jesus there is always hope. With God there is always hope. Even though the weeds can seem at times to be overwhelming, they will not last, and they will not prevail, for the love of God is stronger.

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