

Sermon - Wheat and Weeds

I'm sure we can all identify with our two scripture readings. The first in Romans, speaking of a world and of individual lives groaning; the second in Matthew of a good world invaded by evil. In Rom 8 the word 'groan' appears three times. It's a word very relevant to our present time. The planet groans with the pandemic that seems to have reached every corner of the globe. And in addition to that there are the ongoing groans with the effects of global warming; countries like Syria groaning with their ongoing warfare; and so many other things nearby and far away that join together in a worldwide groan of anguish, suffering and despair.

The question is 'What is our response to this reality?' For some it can be summarised in the bumper sticker slogan of decades ago, 'Stop the world, I want to get off' – wanting to retreat into one's own little world, and to insulate oneself from the turmoil around us. It reminds me of that song from the 60's:

Close the door, light the light, we're stayin' home tonight
Far away from the bustle and the bright city lights
Let them all fade away, just leave us alone
And we'll live in a world of our own.

It's possible for us as Christ followers to have a similar outlook - to stick our head in the sand and only pull it out when Jesus returns. But that won't do. As followers of Jesus our response needs to be different.

Just as Jesus Himself entered into the darkness and suffering of our world, so should we.

There is that lovely expression that says, 'It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.'

There's a lot of cursing of the darkness in our world, but happily there is also a good deal of lighting of candles. We've seen that in different ways over the past months in this country and around the world.

Yesterday was International 'Nelson Mandela Day'. 18th July was his birthday and people are encouraged to spend time on that day in some form of service to the community – in honour of a man who devoted much of his life to working for a better and more equal world. For us as followers of Jesus this should be a daily, ongoing practise in honour of the one who, more than anybody else, gave His life in the service of humanity. We need to be at the forefront of bringing light and hope into a dark and desperate world. 'You are light for the world, said Jesus, 'let your light shine before others so that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father in heaven.'

Edmund Burke wrote 250 years ago "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing." And as the forces of darkness and evil combine together to spread their devastation, so Burke encouraged people to join their rays of light with others to make a powerful force for good. What rays of light can we shed abroad in the world, individually and together to drive back the darkness and to lessen the groans of humanity?

A second message that comes to us from this parable is the danger of judging. Sometimes as Christians, instead of concerning ourselves with our lives and what we should be doing, we concern ourselves with looking for faults in others – those in our church or other churches or denominations. We can become like the workers in Jesus' parable who want to go and pull out the weeds. The problem is that it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish between the wheat and the weeds.

And so in the church the people we may identify as weeds may just be wheat that interpret parts of the Bible differently from us, or see certain issues differently from us, or wheat that prefers a different style of worship. The reality is that, as humans our judgments are often wrong. I love the story about a Charlie Chaplin look-alike competition that was held. It was during Chaplin's lifetime and he happened to be in the area. So as a joke he entered. He came third. In the sermon on the mount Jesus says, 'Do not judge. Paul, writing to the Corinthians (1Cor 4:5) says, 'Judge nothing before the time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in the darkness and will expose the motives of each one's heart.' The fact is that none of us knows everything about the motives of another's heart or mind or background or secret struggles. Robbie Burns once wrote, 'Who made the heart, 'tis He alone decidedly can try us; He knows each chord, its' various tone; each spring its various bias.'

That doesn't mean we shouldn't know what we believe and where we stand on issues. It's fair enough to say, 'This is how I see it, and I feel you are mistaken.' But we cannot pass final judgment on someone, writing them off and consigning them to hell, as it were. Perhaps it's a case of distinguishing between disagreement on the one hand and judgement on the other. I can disagree with someone without condemning them and pronouncing judgement on them. James 2:13 says, 'For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment'. Let mercy triumph over judgment – wise words for us all.

The last message of the parable is that of hope; hope in the midst of turmoil. Jesus starts this parable as he often does his parables with the words, 'The kingdom of God is like..' So what does this one teach us about what the Kingdom is like? As with a number of other parables Jesus is saying here, 'The Kingdom is already amongst you. It may not exist in its fullness; it may be obscured by the weeds of the world, but it is here and ultimately it will triumph and be displayed in its fullness.' It is a message of hope and confidence for the future.

David wrote in Ps 37, 'Do not fret because of evil people or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon die away.' If one looks at the evil rulers and their regimes, is it not true that they rise but before long they die away - Hitler and Nazism, the Soviet Union, Apartheid. That doesn't mean that there won't be imperfect governments in the future, but it does show us that evil does not last indefinitely and it points us to the day when evil will be finally destroyed.

Going back to Ps 37 the Psalmist continues, 'Trust in the Lord and do good, dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in Him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like

the noonday sun.' It takes us back to where we started: Do good. Let your light shine. Instead of cursing the darkness, light a candle.

Martin Luther King delivered his last sermon the day before his assassination. He concluded his remarks that night with these words: 'I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter to me now. Because I've been to the mountain top. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight, that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."