

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Reflection – 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity – 19<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

**Online Service**

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**The Parable of Weeds among the Wheat**

Our gospel this week is another agricultural parable – a situation that all who heard Jesus would be well familiar with. In this parable a sower sows good seed but whilst everybody was asleep an enemy came and scattered weeds. When the wheat grew the weeds grew also which surprised the sower's workmen as they knew that the sower had sown only good seed. They asked the sower if they should do a bit of weeding and get rid of the weeds but the man who had sowed the good seed said no, because in taking up the weeds you might also take up the good growth of the wheat.

Just as with the parable of the soils we read last week, Jesus gives the meaning of the parable to his disciples when they were alone together and the crowds had left. Jesus explained that the sower is himself, the son of man, the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom. The weeds are the children of the evil one and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age and the reapers are angels. The weeds, the children of the evil one, will be burned up and the children of the kingdom will, and I like this description, "shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father".

The weeds referred to are thought to be darnel, a poisonous weed organically related to wheat and difficult to distinguish from wheat in the early stages of its growth. Given the occasional feuding of rival farmers, it is not surprising that Roman law would specifically forbid rival farmers sowing such poisonous plants in another's field or that a farmer, who found an abundance of such weeds, would suspect an enemy's hand. By the time the wheat and the weeds were grown to a point that they could be distinguished the roots would be so intertwined that in uprooting the darnel the workmen would also uproot the wheat. The only use for the darnel was to burn it as fuel.

We can take two perspectives on this parable – its relevance to the present day and the end times. For the present time we learn that the righteous will co-exist with the unrighteous and we had better get used to it. Jesus explains that God tolerates the wicked in the present for the sake of his elect, but will distinguish between the two at the end of time. The kingdom remains obscure in the present world and only the final day will bring God's true children into their glory and banish the wicked from among them. At the end of time unrepentant sinners, those who refuse to acknowledge God and even rebel against him, will be gathered out first and cast into the furnace of fire, and then the faithful, those who are counted as 'righteous', will shine forth in God's kingdom.

This parable raises two or three topics – evil, the day of judgement and hell – that the church seems surprisingly uncomfortable talking about, at least judged by our lectionary readings and the liberal universalist sermons we hear. We don't have time today to address all three topics so we will look only at evil because my brother Christopher Morgan has been haranguing us to talk about evil for several weeks now.

I have to say my understanding of evil has been greatly influenced by the writings of Tom Wright, research professor at St. Andrew's University, Scotland, but the best exposition on evil I have heard is by Robert Charles Sproul, a theologian and ordained Presbyterian minister who died in 2017. His talk on evil is available on youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hzc7KuMj6o>) and I urge you to take an hour to listen to what he has to say. Unfortunately, I cannot do his talk justice but I will attempt to hit the highlights.

In this parable, the weeds are called the children of the evil one and their sower is called Satan or the evil one himself, the children's father. So, what is evil and where did evil come from? These are some of the most difficult questions that we as Christians wrestle with. Paul calls evil the mystery of iniquity and evil remains a mystery but because of theologians that have lived over the ages we can take a reasonable shot at defining what evil is. It is altogether more difficult to say where evil came from and how it entered a world that was created by and is governed by a sovereign God who is holy, loving and good.

Reverend Sproul postulates that evil has no independent being. It has no substance nor is it a force like gravity or magnetism but evil is the quality of acts done by humans that can be defined as good or evil. He draws on the work of Thomas Aquinas and Saint Augustine in using two approaches of philosophical argument – negation and privation. Negation seeks to define evil by what it is

not. Negation cites the opposite qualities of that which is the opposite of evil i.e. good. For example: if good is godliness, holiness, righteousness and justice; evil is ungodliness, unholiness, unrighteousness and injustice. Privation defines evil in terms of a lack or deficiency. So, sin/evil can be defined as being a “transgression of the righteous law of God, and contrary thereunto” (Westminster Confession of Faith 1647). In this definition, evil is simply a lack of living to the standards of God’s law. Evil could be compared to a parasite which depends on its host (we humans) for its life and sustenance but when the host dies the parasite dies too. Whilst evil has no independent being, when humans do evil acts, its effects are real and can be devastating.

So much for the attempts of philosophers and theologians to define evil. We can now turn to where evil comes from which is altogether a thornier problem and despite the best efforts of all those philosophers and theologians we have to say “we do not know”. I personally take refuge in verse six from today’s psalm: “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it”. The undeniable existence of evil in the world calls the very existence of God into question. If God has all the attributes that we ascribe to him including being omniscient (all knowing), omnipotent (all powerful) and a God of love, how can He permit the evil that we see in the world today to continue and wreak the havoc it does? Karl Barth called this the ‘impossible possibility’ – an insoluble conundrum. Various theories for the origin of evil have been proposed. You are probably most familiar with the free will argument which says God gave us the ability to choose between different courses of action unimpeded - which is true, but it does not explain the source of evil. Why do we have the inclination to disobey God even though we know full well that He requires our obedience?

Whilst admitting that he does not know the origin of evil, Reverend Sproul comes up with a statement that was very surprising to me. Quoting Saint Augustine, he says that in a way God ordained that evil would come into the world. If God did not ordain it then it would not be here for evil does not have the power to overcome God’s sovereign and providential governance of this world. Romans 28 verse 8 says “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” Unless God has sovereign power over evil, He could not keep this promise. This is not to say that evil things are good but God can and does use our evil acts to work for good.

The story of Joseph is a good illustration of this. Joseph’s brothers wished him evil. They first wanted to kill him but then they sold him as a slave. Their intentions were decidedly evil. However, God used their evil acts to bring about

the good that Joseph's brothers and father would eventually benefit from when famine struck the land and Joseph had by that time been promoted to be second only to Pharaoh. And this was after somebody else – Potiphar's wife – had also done evil to Joseph.

An even more powerful illustration is what happened at Calvary. Without doubt, Caiaphas, the high priest, the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin pursued an evil path, the soldiers and eventually all the people did evil by crucifying an innocent man. Yet God trumped this evil using Christ's death to bring the ultimate good – salvation to the world. "It was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer" (Isaiah 53 v 10). If there is one thing we have to admit, it is that we do not know how the atrocities of this world can result in good and we will not know that until all is revealed when we are united with God in His kingdom.

You may be disappointed that I have not been able to answer the question about the source of evil but as Reverend Sproul concludes, although we do not know the origin of evil, we do know its future. We know that evil has been overcome and there will be no evil nor sin of any kind when God's kingdom is complete on earth.