

SERMON 23 JULY 2017

I expect many of you will remember the song “If I ruled the world, every day would be the first day of Spring”, and so on. It appeals to the imagination doesn't it! All the wonderful things one could make happen in that glorious new Spring sunshine! One could make everyone feel happy and fulfilled, safe and at peace. Really?! On further thought, I think it would be a terrifying prospect to rule the world. It would, in effect, be playing God and what an overwhelming responsibility that would be. There may well be people who think that they could make a pretty good job of it. It could be said that there are world leaders right now who seem to be trying to do just that: to shape the world according to how they want it to be, usually for themselves, and we can see how that plays out.

I think this gives us pause for thought about how we understand God and the way God works. Maybe we often can't see how God is working, and often enough people think God doesn't care or doesn't exist because so much seems to be going wrong and God seems to be doing nothing to stop it. People have thrown their faith aside because of this. If God were really God and felt things as we do, God would be intervening, bringing an end to the violence, the suffering, the oppression, the destruction of the earth. Surely we would make a better job of it ourselves if we had the opportunity?

There are some very big issues at stake here, issues that are flagged in the parable we heard read from Matthew; another one about a sower and the seed. (Did you, for a moment, think we were having the same reading as last week?!) Yes, today we heard about a sower, but this week's reading is more about weeding than sowing, because, in the story Jesus tells, the evil one comes sneaking along at night and sows weeds amongst the farmers good seeds. This is an image we can probably all imagine: the plot carefully

prepared, the plants beginning to flourish, and up, apparently from nowhere, spring the weeds. In our previous house Clive and I had a big garden. I used to despair of the onion weed. It seemed to come from nowhere and was almost impossible to get rid of. The weeds spoil the look of beauty, the carefully planned planting. It makes me think of the anecdote about the passer-by stopping to admire a beautiful garden where a man was working. "Isn't it wonderful what God does!" exclaimed the passer-by. "You should have seen what a mess God made of it when he had it to himself" the gardener replied.

Jesus' story is quite shocking really, on a number of levels. It is counter-intuitive. We don't want to leave the weeds there to grow big alongside the chosen crop. It spoils the look. And that's just it. That's the way in which the Church, or the community of faith for whom Matthew was writing, always wants to make sure that sin, evil, wrongdoers or whatever, are weeded out, so that the purity of the faithful is kept just that, pure. It happens everywhere, all the time. There are endless examples: big ones like the Inquisition; the witch-hunts of the Middle Ages; the many sects that have arisen over different centuries where those who stray are banned. There is one such here in Sydney, not far from where I live. When I was police chaplain at Parramatta I spent time with a sergeant whose wife had fled from this group and was ever after prohibited from contacting or seeing her parents and siblings who were still part of the community. It happens within families: a strict parent ends up oppressing the children with prohibitions. What happens? They can only either rebel and leave so they can make a life for themselves, or accept and be forced to comply with the parent's wishes. There are so many variations on this theme, and they all involve a lot of pain.

Jesus' parable is stunning in that it acknowledges that there is wrong, even evil, but we are told to leave it. Why is that? How can that possibly work? We have to listen carefully here because Jesus is not actually saying that people should not resist evil. He is saying that the good plants will be able to withstand the bad ones. The good ones can still grow strong. They may be more threatened by the tearing out of the bad ones because they are sharing the same soil and their roots grow close.

The problem is that there is always the temptation to judge and to think that we, or the Church, or our particular group knows best. This parable is a call to humility. "If I ruled the world..." Thank God we do not. If we ruled the world, all kinds of bad judgement calls would be made because, when it comes to dealing with those whose behaviour, attitudes, moral behaviour is different from ours, our responses come from concern for ourselves, and those who are like us, more than from a broader understanding of humanity. Such attitudes themselves take root. We see it all around us: the debate over sexuality has taken precedence over other things, like poverty and injustice, that destroy human flourishing; Muslims who have been born and brought up here, who are Australian, are shouted at and told to go back to where they came from because they are regarded as terrorist material. I have to say, I was quite distraught on Thursday morning when I heard that our government had cut off water supplies to the camps on Manus Island where people are still living because the camps are being shut down and they want the people there to move out into the villages, where they are not welcomed and do not feel safe. When we think in terms of "them" and "us" we seem to create different categories of human beings. When we have influence or power, much that is done comes from our egos. All this creates space for the weeds of judgementalism to grow even stronger; for the evil one to creep alongside. In other words, when we think we, the Church, or any institution are doing the

right thing, the good thing, we may actually be in danger of doing the wrong thing in God's bigger picture.

When, as the ancients did, we personalise these problems as belonging to "the evil one", a distance is created between the reality of the problem and what is regarded as the devil who is then one step removed. It has always been much easier to understand evil as personalised like this, because there is much of it around that is otherwise hard to make sense of. But Jesus was not telling this story primarily as a reflection on the nature of evil. This parable is telling us some deep things. It points to the fact that the evil one is the enemy of love. Jesus' message, throughout the gospels, is about the nature of God's love. It cuts through all the ego stuff that is an essential part of who we all are but which can become very self-centred. It cuts through all our cultural expectations. It cuts through all our judgementalism and tendency to exclude those who are different. It opens out whole new ways of looking at the world and brings us to the ideas of God's Kingdom, the Kingdom of heaven as Matthew more often describes it. It is this that parables point us towards. Think of the many stories that Jesus told and situations he was involved in that are further illustrations of this kingdom of love: the way he embraced the children and many who were regarded as outcasts and unclean; the way he disregarded the Sabbath law so his disciples could eat; the story of the shepherd leaving his 99 sheep to look for the lost one, to name but a few. Jesus was able to stand aside from the culture of his time and the traditions he was part of so he could show everyone the broader picture of God's love that so easily becomes distorted. The story we heard today is a reminder to the Church at how easily the institution, and we who are part of it, distort the way of love and how often we all buy into the modes of power, success and separation from the world.

It seems we are meant to be open to the idea that what happens in the end is up to God, but, in the meantime, we are meant to rub shoulders with all those amongst whom we live and not to be afraid, not to try to protect our reputations or the way we appear to those around us. Jesus was not the slightest bit worried about that. After all, who knows what may happen between people when those who live out of a heart of love show a non-judgemental way to those who are struggling, who may feel themselves to be weeds or who have never had the opportunities to find good soil beneath them. Maybe the intended crop grows even stronger because of the presence of different things around it. Who knows? Fortunately we just have to have faith that it really is God who rules the world, not us. We can have faith in that, even when it seems that God is doing nothing, because God *is* involved in the struggles of human life. Jesus' life, his total involvement with the difficulties of the people around him, his refusal to compromise on building the Kingdom, starting in the here and now - all this pulls us back to trust in God when we are tempted to go rushing in and weed out what we think is not worthy or even downright bad. Jesus stood up against evil and met it with love, even when it took him to the cross. That is a hard road to walk. It is the road we are called to follow along. We can only do that when we understand that the resurrection showed that the ultimate power is love. We can only do that if we can look around and give thanks that the world's wellbeing does not rely on our wisdom but on the far deeper wisdom of God. Thank God that we do not rule the world.