

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
19/07/2020
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

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| Genesis 28: 10-19a | Jacob's Dream at Bethel All people will be blessed through him |
| Psalm 139: 1-11 23,24 | God is All knowing and ever present |
| Romans 8: 12-25 | By the Spirit we have hope for Future Glory |
| Matthew 13: 24-30 36-43 | Jesus tells the parable of the weeds in the wheat fields |

Introduction

I can remember going to a BBQ once on a Sunday afternoon. It was not long after I was ordained, and some one who wasn't a Christian asked me "So did you give them all Hellfire and Brimstone this morning?"

I'm not sure if he actually knew what it might mean, and I probably missed a golden opportunity to witness, but I briefly told him what I did preach about and the conversation soon moved on.

But what do we, in the church think of when we hear hellfire and Brimstone? I'll admit that the best definition I've ever had of Brimstone came from the Movie – Shrek. As he goes towards the castle surrounded by a fiery mote to rescue the princess, the donkey confuses the bad odour of the brimstone with something coming from Shrek.

But we hear in verse 42 from the gospel reading today:-

"They will throw them into the fiery furnace; where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Jesus here is talking about the opposite of the Kingdom of Heaven. He is also talking about the end times, which is not now but into the future. I'm sure that these words aren't meant to be heard as smugly looking at those outside the Church, but rather as a warning to all those who have heard about Jesus. We know only too well from recent world events that evil is a reality in our world. We see it both in Nature and in human activity. From the Droughts and Bushfires, to Coronavirus, to the masses of people who continue to suffer without adequate food, water and shelter in a world that has plenty, evil is very clear. Jesus talks of it's consequences in the parable of the weeds among the wheat.

The Kingdom of Heaven

In this parable we've just heard, Jesus began with the words, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." So that is what I would like us to look at this morning.

The Kingdom of Heaven

We have heard a couple of parables this morning, but the whole of chapter 13 is filled with Jesus telling parables about the Kingdom of Heaven.

Last week we heard the parable of the 4 soils where the Kingdom and the Word were used interchangeably. In today's parable we've heard about the weeds among the wheat, and there are also parables about a mustard seed, yeast, hidden treasure, a pearl and a fishing net. Jesus uses all these things familiar to the people in their everyday lives to talk about the Kingdom of Heaven. In fact Matthew has Jesus beginning his ministry with these words in ch 4 v 17

"Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near"

So how do we understand the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus often said that in him the Kingdom of Heaven had arrived, but there is also constant reference to a future event, often referred to as the Judgment. So the Kingdom of Heaven is among us "now" through Jesus. Through his incarnation, through his life, his death and his resurrection, and yet the Kingdom of Heaven is also "not yet" as we await his second coming. It is something we hope for, something we eagerly anticipate. We say "Your kingdom come" every time we recite the Lords prayer, and we've heard in Paul's letter to the Romans in v 24 &25:-

"²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

But the word Kingdom seems to me though, to be a word we probably don't relate well to in the 21st century. It conjures up fairytale images and is specific to a certain area. In the psalm today we hear of an all-knowing, ever-present God. Kingdom seems to be not big enough. To me swapping the word Kingdom for Rule and swapping the word Heaven for God giving the phrase "Rule of God" might be more meaningful for us as we think about the phrase Kingdom of Heaven. It seems to be more all embracing.

So as Christians we see the "Rule of God" as current in the world, and yet still being worked out.

Opposite to the Kingdom of Heaven

And how then does the Devil fit into all this?

He was well and truly defeated by Jesus. When Jesus died on the cross, our sins, and the sins of the whole world were forgiven. And in Jesus' resurrection, we have hope for our own resurrection. But evil still exists.

I like the analogy which uses the end of World War Two in Europe, to try to explain the current state of the Kingdom of Heaven. It's not perfect but I think it can help.

On the 6th June 1944 D-Day occurred. The allies invaded France in massive numbers both from the sea and the air. It was clear after this day that the allies would win the war and that Germany would lose, but it wasn't until May 1945 almost a year later that Germany surrendered.

As Christians Easter was our D-Day, but we haven't yet reached the end of the war. The devil still lurks to try to trap us, but in Jesus we have full power over him.

The Parable of the weeds in the wheat

Let us now look in detail at the parable of the weeds in the wheat. Again we have a parable this week where it's interpretation is given in scripture. Jesus uses a story of something the people would understand as it was an agricultural society. He later explains the meaning of the story to the disciples. In this story, Jesus plants the good seed which generates believers, the Devil plants the bad seed, and the field is the world. Both are allowed to grow in the world, and the Harvest is the Judgment time when the weeds will finally be sorted from the wheat.

It might seem strange to us that an enemy would plant weeds in your field, but history provides us with details of Roman laws against this offence, with strict punishments. There is also a weed called darnel which is common throughout the near East. This weed looks like wheat when it first sprouts. It's roots spread out and interlink with surrounding plants and it is quite poisonous when mature. So Jesus uses the reality of his surroundings in telling this story of the Kingdom of Heaven

Reflection on Parable

There are many facets to this parable, and it is probably representative of not only the church during Matthew's time, but also our own. We see it time and time again that in the world, into the family we are born, and even the church is not an entirely trustworthy place. The world has places of wonder, but alleys of cruelty too. We share with families that can cause deep pain as well as great joy. The church can be inspiringly courageous one minute and petty and faithless the next. Good mixes in with the bad. If we think about our lives, we could all probably admit to times of wondering where all the weeds are coming from.

When the master in the parable forbids the servants to go and weed out the field, this is not to be interpreted as a call to be passive in the face of evil. This is not a divine command to ignore justice in the world, violence in society, or wrong in the church. Rather it is a reminder to us that the servants do not finally have the ability to get rid of all the weeds, and that sometimes attempts to pluck the weeds may cause more harm than good. This is just the way it is.

So are we lost forever, then, in a hopelessly compromised world? No we are not! The parable contains the promise that in God's Wisdom, and in God's time, all of the weeds will ultimately be destroyed. Evil is real in our world, but if we listen to this parable it is temporary. Only the good will endure. The parable finally leads those who place their trust in Jesus, to a place of joy and hope. We live now in an imperfect world, and no human effort can fully eradicate that fact. But that was never our job anyway. We are given the task of living as faithfully and as obediently as possible, confident and expectant for the time of the Harvest.

Conclusion

In summing up, how are we to live "now" in the kingdom of heaven, which currently exists but is also still to come. If we accept Jesus into our lives we are called to live as wheat and not as weeds. We are called to produce a good harvest. We are not to worry about when Jesus will return, but rather we are to live out our lives seeking the "Rule of God", and showing the deeds of mercy, forgiveness and peace that characterize kingdom people.