



# *Eighth Sunday after Pentecost*

## *Sermon by Revd Margaret Place*



Sunday 23 July 2023

### READINGS

Genesis 28: 10-19a; Psalm 139: 1-11, 23-24; Romans 8: 12-25; Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

## *Good and evil*

These days we seem to have reached a point where good and evil are so re-defined and so merged, that we don't know really what we are supposed to be believing. Things that our parents and grandparents forbade or at least frowned upon are now perfectly acceptable, and certain opinions and attitudes which would normally be accepted as free speech, are now worthy of at least cancel culture, if not litigation. Over-arching all this is the general attitude of universal acceptability and tolerance of all, and while such inclusivity is a welcome recognition of the love of a God who created all things and all people, it also seems to have made evil deeds easier to commit, and more difficult to bring perpetrators to justice. It is so difficult to know what to do or to think, that we tend to shut ourselves off from any meaningful discourse, and stay out of trouble by creating a little religious cocoon of our own and staying there safely. After all, it's not safe to say anything these days!

Today's Gospel deals with the dichotomy of good and evil. In this Gospel Jesus uses a parable which would have been instantly recognized by all his hearers. It was not uncommon for an angry neighbour to sabotage his enemy's attempts at providing for his family by sowing weeds amongst his crops. The weeds that in older versions of the English bible were translated a "tares" actually refers to a form of wild rye grass called – for those of you who appreciate scientific accuracy, "Lolium Temulentum", or as Jesus' hearers would have called it "zizanian", also something they would have recognized. Its seeds are poisonous, and if they get mixed up with wheat, then those who ate the resulting bread would be nauseous and dizzy and could become quite ill. It's difficult to tell the difference between this and wheat plants when they are small, but when they are mature and their seeds have developed, the fruits are very different, and it makes it easier to sort out the two, hence leaving the crop until harvest time.

So how is this parable going to help us navigate our way around in a very confusing world, where evil has largely been attenuated? Firstly, we need to recognise that evil does exist. Jesus is loving, inclusive, is critical of a pedantic small-minded way of practising the Law, but he never denies that evil exists. Even our psalm for today, while it glories in the wonder of God and God's creation, it ends by asking God to deal with any evil in the psalmist's life. There is a hostile power that will ruin anything good if it is given the chance and a big part of the crucifixion was the defeat of evil and death. No wonder sin is so much part of the Bible.

Secondly, and this is where it becomes difficult, how do we decide who is good and who is bad? The fact that judgement takes place at the END of the harvest time is probably a clue to this. How many prodigal sons and daughters become wonderful bearers of the Gospel message when they have been saved? People who have committed great evil in their lives do become saved and live totally new, productive lives. And how many pastors are caught on charges of sexual harassment, fraud, and abuse and end their

ministries in disgrace? But in the course of their ministries, there are those who were healed and helped in various ways. So who knows where these prodigals will end? And who, ultimately, is good and who is bad? It's impossible to judge. It is also true within ourselves we are a mixture of weeds and wheat. There are times when we are truly God's instrument on earth, but we also have our weak points – many of them. Some of you may remember that rhyme we were taught as children:

*"There was a little girl  
Who had a little curl  
Right down the middle of her forehead.  
When she was good she was very, very good  
And when she was bad she was horrid."*

That's us – and I'm sure there is a corresponding one for boys, somewhere.

We need to ask how many people we put off the Christian faith, and how many have become closer to God in spite of or because of what have done and who we are. We are a good mixture of both, and it takes a lifetime to acknowledge that fact, never mind trying to put it right. Only the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit can override our sinful tendencies, and the love of God working patiently all our lives can make sure there is enough wheat at the end to have made our lives worthwhile. So while it is important to know there is good and evil, we can only judge ourselves. Because everyone is this peculiar mixture of good and bad, we can only allow God to judge other people, but it's to be hoped we are sufficiently attuned to the Holy Spirit to be able to judge ourselves accurately. We cannot judge anyone, and it's only by grace that God shows us our sin. Only God can, and God waits until the very end before any condemnation happens. Until then, God hopes in our accepting of the love given through Jesus Christ our Lord.

St Paul echoes this in our passage from Romans. We need to be in the Spirit all the time, and not prey to the demands of materialism as demanded by the fleshly existence. And we need to endure all the difficulties that entails, the suffering that such a life demands, because in the end, we will reveal God's glory and our society itself will recognise, through the light of our lives, the dirt and decay that has grown up around and throughout it. Our Christian hope is that we wait patiently for the revelation of God, for the end of evil, and for that glorious life lived in the light of God so eventually that the wheat in our lives can flourish, and the removal of the zizania is a far less painful affair. If we have any doubt about the way God works, let's look at our Old Testament passage. Jacob, on the run from an angry brother, is sleeping in the open, with a stone for a pillow. He, with the connivance of his mother, has robbed his brother Esau of the birthright that was rightfully his, and is heading to his uncle for protection. In spite of this, God appears to him in a dream and promises that he will become a father of a great nation. Even in the wrong we have committed, God will still work with us. God did a lot more with Jacob, and by the time he returned to his homeland, he was a grown up man, more ready to do what God asked him to do. Growing to spiritual maturity is a long-term affair, and we need to be totally committed if we want to allow God to work in our lives.

Even today's psalm shows us how wonderful God's creation is, but the final two verses ask God to deal with the wicked.

So we go forward with courage. We can't see the good from the bad, very often. But we serve a God who is quite clear on the matter. If we keep close to our Saviour, and try to love as he loved, and live as he lived, we have a good chance of steering a clear path through the morass of modern living. And at the end, may we a fruitful people, whose lives will be to the betterment of many. As we saw in our psalm, we serve a God who knows us very well. In all our trying to follow him, we know that he is already there, and will meet us in that path of ministry he has prepared for us to do for God's sake, and to the glory of the trinity.