

Bishop Jonathan's Sermon – Sixth Sunday after Trinity – 19th July 2020

Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43 – The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have been doing a bit more gardening than usual during the lockdown. Well, there's plenty to be done in our garden – and there's not been much else to do, with all the shops and other places closed much of the time! Actually, it's been quite enjoyable – though don't say it too loud, or I will be found more jobs to do!

The worst thing of course is the weeds. Plants in places you don't want them. Roots that need pulling up, or the weeds will be back again before you know it. On the other hand, in a garden it is at least fairly easy to spot what is a weed and what isn't – at least under the expert direction of the head gardener!

That was not the case, however, in the story we heard in our gospel reading – the story known as the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. Now, I guess we all know what wheat is – and we probably have a fair idea of what it looks like. But what about the "tares"? Well, tares are a kind of weed that looks almost identical to wheat, at least until they are both fully grown. That means that it is really hard to separate out the tares while the two plants are growing side by side – because you could easily end up pulling out the wheat and leaving the tares still in the field!

So what is that to do with anything – and especially, to do with us? Well, Jesus says this parable is about the *kingdom of heaven*, and the way God goes about things. And the story is essentially a reminder that some things are best left to God – rather than us trying to sort them out for ourselves.

The workers in the fields are all for going and ripping up the weeds, but the landowner knows this will risk damaging the good crop, so he tells them to wait until the harvest time, when all will become clearer.

And in today's world (and today's church) it can be tempting for us to think we know just what is right and who is wrong. We know what needs to be done, and we know the people who think differently are just plain wrong. It could be over matters of politics, or it could be to do with something in the life of the Church. Either way we know we are right and the other lot should be sent packing. Well, we may not actually send them packing, but we will certainly have little or nothing to do with them, because we would rather stick with our own tribe, with people who think like us, with people who *are* like us.

Now, please understand, this does not mean there will not be times when we *do* have to choose, when we should take a stand and even kick up a fuss. There are times when people's behaviour is so manifestly wrong that they deserve to be called out and sanctioned in one way or another. If we do not take stand at times like that, if we do not speak out and take action, then we can end up colluding with evil, like the people of Germany did in the 1930s or the people of Bosnia at the time of the Srebrenica massacre in 1995. "Ethnic cleansing" is a phrase that should send a shiver down our spines.

And the same applies in our own time and place. Today, racism needs to be recognised and challenged. We need to understand the way that power and prejudice come together to affect the

lives of black people in our society – and not just in the United States of America. We need to be prepared to stand up for an end to racism and to work for a more just society for all.

But that is not really the kind of thing I have in mind here, or that this parable is about. It is not about the *obvious* weeds that stand out like a sore thumb. This is about the subtler things that are harder to distinguish and harder therefore to separate out. They may seem wrong to us, given our perspective, given the way we see the world, but we cannot be entirely sure that we have got all the answers – and maybe, just maybe those others actually have something to teach us as well.

This could apply to controversial subjects in society, like people's views on Brexit, or on some of the controversial topics in the life of the Church, such as sexuality. *The key thing we need to take from this parable is that it is not for us to sort this out by deciding who is in and who is out.* We are to leave that for God at the end of the age – and in the meantime to get on with the business of encouraging the growth of God's kingdom by ploughing the field and sowing the seed and watering the crop.

At the end of the day, God may say that some were right and some were wrong. He may even decide that some should be in and some should be out – *but that is his job and not ours!* We are labourers in the fields and our job is to tend the crop and help it to grow.

Right now as Christians we have a job to do, which is to help our society to come together and to flourish in the aftermath of the Coronavirus crisis and as we prepare for life outside the EU. Those things are far more important than how people voted in the Referendum. And inside the Church we have a job to do as well, which is to come together to serve our communities and to make our churches into places that can welcome and support people of every shape and size and background, who will be struggling with all sorts of challenges in the months and years ahead.

So please can we take to heart the message of this parable? We are not called to judge those with whom we differ – God will do the judging in his own good time. Rather we are called to encourage the growth of God's Church and of his Kingdom. So in the time ahead let's not focus on our differences and on that which might divide us, but instead do all we can to work together for the coming of God's kingdom of justice and peace. That above all is what God is calling us to do as we come out of this strange time of lockdown and prepare for the new and perhaps very different world that awaits us. Amen.