

Readings for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

23rd July 2023

First Reading: Genesis 28:10-19a

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!' And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel.

Second Reading: Romans 8:12-25

Brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Gospel: St Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

Jesus put before the crowd another parable:

'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and

bore grain then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, “Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?” He answered, “An enemy has done this.” The slaves said to him, “Then do you want us to go and gather them?” But he replied, “No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”

Then Jesus left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.’ He answered, ‘The one who sows the good seed is 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. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!’

A Reflection for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

“It’s not fair!”

I am sure that many of us have heard these words from the voice of a child, or perhaps indeed an adult, at some perceived injustice. Maybe we remember uttering them, or at least thinking them, ourselves. Some people will suggest that children have an innate sense of fairness, and in some cases that may be true, but more often I think we are all quicker to desire justice when it is to our advantage. We are more likely to claim that ‘it’s not fair’ when a brother or sister has a larger slice of cake, or more time with a preferred toy, than when we do. And, if we look at the world today, we are not overly vocal about the unfairness of distribution of the world’s wealth and resources between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’.

Today’s Gospel reading, the parable of the wheat and the weeds, follows on the agricultural theme from the parable of the sower last week. In part, it is a reminder that we have a just God – justice is part of who God is – and, at the end, we will all face God’s righteous judgment.

In this parable, an enemy comes in a stealthy, and even threatening, manner to sow weed seeds amongst the wheat. This weed is usually identified as darnel, a ryegrass that looks very similar to wheat in the early stages of growth. It can often carry a poisonous fungus which, if gathered with the wheat, will contaminate the whole harvest, causing financial loss and potentially harm to health if consumed. Therefore, farmers usually acted to remove the weeds before they matured, as the servant in the parable suggests, to prevent this.

But parables have a twist; here the farmer rejects that common practice and instead leaves the weeds to grow, intending to gather them first before the wheat. It must have raised questions in the minds of Jesus’ audience as to what kind of farmer this was, and if he knew what he was doing taking such a risky strategy.

In ancient times, a traditional understanding of such a parable would have the farmer or householder representing God, the enemy was the devil, the field or wheat was Israel, and the weeds were the Gentiles, the other nations. So, this parable would have been interpreted as telling us that, ultimately, God will judge the Gentiles and reject them while restoring Israel.

However, Jesus offers a different interpretation in which he distinguishes between the children of the kingdom and the children of the evil one rather than between Israel and the Gentiles. The sower is the Son of Man, Jesus, and the seed is the children of the kingdom, those who follow him. The field is the whole world rather than just Israel, and the weeds are the children of the evil one, those who reject Jesus and would lead others astray, whom Matthew associates elsewhere with the Pharisees and Jewish leaders. He offers a sharp contrast in the image of judgment with that of blessing where 'the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.' Then, he repeats the warning that we also heard last week: 'Let anyone with ears listen!' The parable reminds us that we will all face judgement but also provides words of reassurance of the redemption of the children of the kingdom.

This parable is typically read as a warning to the church that the forces of evil are at work in the world, undermining the teaching of Jesus. Society is a mixture of the good and the bad, and everything in between, and the church too is a reflection of that society. Indeed, there are elements of both saint and sinner in all of us, and a division between good and evil is not as straightforward as we might be tempted to think. So, the parable is also a warning to us not to be tempted to judge one another but to leave that to God, much as we sometimes might not remember or wish to acknowledge that we do not have God's view or knowledge of the world!

The farmer's unusual practice of allowing the weeds and the wheat to grow together is a reminder that God's grace remains available to all who choose it. No-one is beyond redemption. The children of the kingdom are distinguished by humble obedience to God, and a steadfast and active witness to God's work in a world that rarely acknowledges it, trusting in God's Spirit to effect change. Earlier in this Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. Bearing witness in this manner requires us to wait for God's time, with a patience born of faith – not a test of silent endurance but an active trust in God.

This is something that Paul is reflecting on in today's passage from his letter to the Romans. Following the risen Christ means living in a different way amidst the injustices of the world. With an insight into the inter-relatedness of the whole earth, he says that all creation is groaning, all creation is longing for the freedom that God's kingdom brings. If we choose to live according to the way of the flesh, selfishly, putting ourselves and our wants at the centre of our lives, we will reap the judgment of that. But we have received the Spirit of God in baptism. To live according to the way of the Spirit puts God's ways and the salvation of the world at the centre of our lives. God's children, he tells us, the children of the kingdom in Matthew's terminology, are led by the Spirit which enables us to live rightly amidst all that is going on around us, waiting patiently in hope.

All three readings today give us cause for hope. In the reading from Genesis, the story of Jacob's ladder, God renews his promise of land and descendants, previously given to Abraham and Isaac, to Jacob, the next generation, emphasising the constancy of God's presence and provision for all God's people. The passage from Romans concludes with a reminder that the salvation offered by Jesus gives all God's people and all God's creation reason to wait in hope. And the parable of the wheat and the weeds offers reassurance that God's plans for the world will ultimately bear a rich harvest, that God's justice will prevail for all.

