

Church buildings, sacred spaces, gather us together.
Together (in isolation) we gather as one, though physically apart.
God is with us in our houses and homes, just as God is with us
in our churches and cathedrals.
Come. Let us worship as God's scattered community.
As the farmer scatters the seed may the fruits of the Spirit
be plentiful among us, wherever we may be.
A reading from the Psalm for today Psalm 139: 1-14,23-24

Prayer

Creator God,
you are the source of all that is:
the life in every living thing:
birds and beasts; fish and fowl;
crops and the locusts that devour them;
trees and the diseases that threaten them;
wildflowers, which are beautiful in one place,
and troublesome weeds in another.
You made them all, and you made us:
not wholly good or wholly bad,
but full of creative potential, which, like yours,
can be used for good or for harm; squandered or never allowed to flourish.
We come to you today,
not so much to make our confession,
as to open ourselves up to your inspection:
ready to be surprised
by the good that may reveal;
hoping not to be too discouraged
by what is harmful and what needs to be changed.
But first, we need to open our eyes and look, with you,
at the ripening harvest of our lives.
What shoots of new growth can we see? What is there in us that is stronger and healthier than it
was before?
Let us give thanks: with God and to God,
for every growth in grace; every lesson learned; every kindness shown; every struggle overcome. let
us ask for help to nurture and encourage every seed of life that God has planted.
And now, as we continue looking inwards,
what else can we see?
Are there weeds of tiredness or frustration; thorns of envy or of fear that threaten
to choke the life of the kingdom, growing in us?
Let us acknowledge, before God,
the dangers that we face
and the temptations that draw us.
Let us promise not to feed these weeds
with our time or water them with our attention,
but to trust God, the farmer, to deal with them,
when the time is right.
Lord of all life, may the seeds of your kingdom, grow in us, and be allowed to flourish,
and may we share with all your faithful people in the joy of the harvest feast.
Lord's Prayer
Amen.

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

New Testament: Romans 8:12-25

Goodies Vs Baddies?

When telling the story last week at a funeral of how the grandson loved going to grandpas house to watch John Wayne films, I was reminded of the hours I spent watching Bonanza and The Lone Ranger with my mum growing up. Or even now, watching Star Wars, or Harry Potter or Disney Descendants with my own children.

In the old-fashioned Westerns, there was no difficulty knowing who the heroes were, who the villains were, and who would triumph in the end. The principal 'goodie' wore a white hat, the 'baddie' wore a black hat, and good had always conquered by the time the credits rolled. Would that life were as simple as it used to be in the cinema or as it is in some of Jesus' parables; such as this one.

The parable of the weeds, unlike the parable of the sower, which precedes it, tackles the universal theological issue of theodicy: why, if God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, is there evil in the world? In the previous parable, the rocks, shallow soil, and thorn bushes are simply there: part of the way life is. The 'evil one' is mentioned in the interpretation, but not in the parable itself. The parable of the weeds, by contrast, is told for the very purpose of explaining what has gone wrong—where the intrusive weeds have come from, if the farmer planted only good seed.

The answer given in the parable, and spelled out in the interpretation, is quite simple. Essentially, the farmer, or the Son of Man, is let off the hook by saying "It wisnae me—a bad boy came and done it!" (with apologies to non-Scots). The weeds have been planted by 'some enemy' during the night. Which also reminds me of my own children watching Harry Potter, Star Wars or Disney Descendants, but maybe that's because there are said to only be seven stories to be told.

However, for theologians and natural historians alike, this sort of dualism is quite unsatisfactory. I love the saying that there is no such thing as a weed—only a plant in the wrong place—and we are acutely aware now of the importance of biological diversity. People are not wholly good or wholly evil; we all have the potential for both. Good intentions can result in bad consequences, and vice versa. To put it more crudely, 's*** happens!'. If God is the source of all life, then responsibility for those aspects that cause problems for human beings, be they weeds or deadly viruses, cannot so easily be handed over to an unknown enemy.

In the context in which the story was recorded, however, all of this matters much less. For a 1st century Christian community; suffering persecution, wondering why Jesus had not returned to establish the Kingdom as he promised; what matters is to reassure them that they have not been wrong to put their trust in him. This may not be how they had imagined their future, as followers of Jesus, to

be, but the kingdom has always been a slippery concept, confounding human expectations. That is why we are given not one, but multiple parables, each revealing a different facet of something that cannot ultimately be defined.

What was important then, as it is now, is to go on trusting that God, as revealed and personified in Jesus, the 'Son of Man', can be trusted, and has not abandoned his people. I was challenged this week to practice what I preach, which often centres on one of the many times God says, Do not be afraid, and instead, to be strong and courageous. It's a strange time we are living in, and yet we can be assured that God is with us.

As the well known wartime saying reminds us,, Keep Calm and Carry On. We may look for subtler explanations than this one of the origins of evil; we may not want to wait until 'the end of the age' for justice to be done; but we need, as much as ever, to be encouraged to 'keep on keeping on': doing our best day by day not to be discouraged by the weeds, looking for and nurturing the shoots of new growth when they appear, and leaving the final outcomes to God.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Living God, we give thanks for all the good things,
that we have seen grow in the course of our lives,
sometimes in the most unpromising of soil;
for difficult times which have helped us
to understand the difficulties that other people face;
for painful losses which have helped us
to value people and things that do not last for ever;
for hard questions that have led us more deeply
Into the mystery of our faith.

We give thanks for farmers and fishing crews;
for all who grow food, and catch it,
prepare it, transport it, market and sell it,
so that we can enjoy an abundance,
that we too easily take for granted.

We pray for those whose livelihoods are at risk,
and whose children this week may not be fed.
May we emerge from this time of hardship
with a new appreciation of all that we have
and a new determination to make this world
a fairer place for all.

We give thanks for those who sow seeds of faith,
of hope and of imagination,
when those gifts are in short supply.
May their work bear a rich harvest.

Gladly, we think of those who cheer us by singing in the darkness;
those who draw us gently into their laughter,
and help us to smile at ourselves;
those who pray for us,
when we have forgotten how to pray for ourselves.

Gracious God, we pray for the church of Jesus Christ,
charged with representing him in the world,
and with tending the fragile seeds of his kingdom.

Help us not to be distracted by the weeds,
but to focus on the fresh, green shoots of new life.

May we not choke that life with the tangled thorns
of our rules and regulations,
of our doctrines and dogmas and clever future plans.

Keep us faithful in our planting, our watering,
and our waiting for the rich harvest that is your glory and your gift. Amen.

Blessing