

The Inevitability of Judgement ...

... is 'Good News'

A sermon given on the Sixth Sunday of Trinity, 19th July 2020, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker in the first post-lockdown attended and recorded service in the Minster.

Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

Well, hello, everybody. How lovely to see you all. It's great to be back in the flesh, as it were. Having said that, I am feeling slightly guilty because this is a wonderful, happy, welcoming occasion, but the gospel reading is all about judgement, which isn't quite the message I would have wished to greet you with this morning. But here we go anyway....There is still a caricature of the Christian faith that sees the church being obsessed with judgement and hell: it's summed up in an episode of 'The Simpsons' where Homer has done something to offend his rather self-righteous Christian neighbour, Ned Flanders. Ned says very sanctimoniously, "I don't judge you, Homer. I leave that to a wrathful, angry God to do."

Nowadays, the majority of people stay away from church and many don't even believe in God. But I don't think that means people have lost their interest in judgement. If social media is anything to go by, vengeful judgementalism is more popular now than ever. Woe betide the female TV presenter who wears the same outfit twice in a row, or the politician who gets in a muddle over the most inconsequential statistic. The Internet trolls do a great job of judging everyone and everything.

And I wonder how recently might you have criticised someone without actually knowing the whole story? Are you ever tempted to write someone off because they don't agree with you or because they don't quite fit your idea of how they should be? It seems there is a deep seated human needs to pass judgement on one another, to declare whether someone else is acceptable or unacceptable. And it is not a need that comes from the Bible or from Christianity - I think it's deeper than that: it's hardwired into our human nature. And of course, we do have to make a distinction between judging the action and judging the person: we couldn't function as a society without declaring some actions and behaviours unacceptable. But that's not the same as judging the perpetrator, the person behind the action.

So when the Bible does talk about judgement, it isn't some alien idea being imposed from far away. It's very close to home and it's relevant to our everyday lives. Nobody likes to be judged harshly, but that doesn't stop us from judging each other with a vengeance. And maybe as we start to see more of each other, as we emerge from our homes and social life picks up again, so the temptation to judge one another may be on the increase. So it's interesting to reflect on what Jesus has to say about judgement, which he does in this typically indirect way in the parable of the wheat and the weeds. And there's three things I would comment on:

First of all, there will be a judgement. Judgement is real and necessary and inevitable at the end of time. Maybe that's why we find it so difficult not to judge one another, because at some unconscious level, we are aware that judgement is hardwired into the very nature of things. There is no escaping it. Jesus uses the imagery of a field: the world is like a field sown with wheat. And the one thing you can be sure of with a field of wheat is that there will be a harvest. There is no point having a field of wheat, if you're not planning to harvest it. So the moment Jesus compares the world to a field of wheat, you know, there's a judgement coming. The time will come when the wheat and the weeds will be cut down without distinction, so we shouldn't be surprised when it happens.

Secondly, the thing that may be surprising is that actually, the inevitability of judgement is 'good' news because it shows the world has a purpose. We're not living in a wild and meaningless jungle, but in a cultivated field with a harvest in mind. And the inevitability of judgement is good because it shows God cares about the difference between good and evil. When we hear and see of so many examples of powerful people acting in a corrupt way; when there are so many people who seem to have no moral sense; when there are so many predators waiting to take advantage of people who are weak or vulnerable - it's 'good news' to know that God sets his face against that. We wouldn't think much of a God who just says "Never mind", and looks the other way. He's promised to come and put things right. And during this time of pandemic, we've perhaps found our horizons narrowed down and we've been focused very much on our own affairs, but the evil in the world continues to prosper: we've heard stories of people selling substandard PPE in order to make a profit; or taking the opportunity of the lockdown to increase an illegal drugs trade, for example. But Jesus says the judgement is inevitable and it's good news that God will come and judge the world and that God can tell the difference between the wheat and the weeds.

And the third thing is that precisely because judgement is inevitable, and precisely because God knows what He is doing better than we do, therefore, you and I shouldn't be tempted to try and do God's job for Him. We have to learn to be humble enough to trust God to do the judging and patient enough to wait for Him to do it in His own time.

We've just been practising patience for the last four months, waiting for the churches to reopen and trusting that the day would come. So we know what it is to live by that kind of faith. And when people fall into judgmentalism and condemning each other, it is a kind of practical atheism: it shows we are unwilling to wait for God and unwilling to believe He might do a better job than we can. Patience is a virtue, albeit a very unfashionable one, and we all want instant redress when things go wrong. The thing is, it's in our interests to be patient. As the parable suggests, it's not that easy to separate out the weeds from the wheat: you may be able to tell the difference between the good and the bad outwardly, but their roots are all tangled up together and you can't pull up the weeds without uprooting the wheat. And often they are growing in one of the same human heart - there may be a mixed harvest both in your heart and mine. I'm reminded of the saying of Alexander Solzhenitsyn that the dividing line between good and evil does not lie between me and anyone else, it runs down the middle of every human heart.

So the good news is that in one sense, judgement has already taken place - this is one way we try to make sense of the death of Jesus; it's what we celebrate in our service of Holy Communion. In the words of the great theologian Karl Barth, the judge has been judged in our place. Jesus has absorbed the judgement on the world's sin on the cross, so that those who give their lives to him may be set free from the burden of judgement. So for those who identify with Jesus, the judgement has already taken place. We have been judged, acquitted and set free, not because we're good, but because the son of God has taken our place, and we live in the light of that.

And because we have been shown mercy, we can find the strength to be merciful, to refrain from judging others, to be patient and to pray for the harvest of the kingdom. So let's see if we can practise something of that this week and trust ourselves to the mercy of God.

Reading Text

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-end

²⁴ He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ 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?" ²⁸ He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" ²⁹ But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with ^{them.}³⁰ 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." '

³⁶ Then he 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.' ³⁷ He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸ the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴² and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!