

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 16 Year A 2017

Those of you who have the privilege and joy of raising children will know the great importance of instilling good manners early on. I haven't quite worked out whether parents feel impelled to form their little darlings into polite well-mannered citizens due to conviction of doing what is right, or fear that they might create a little monster they will have suffer for the rest of their lives if they don't... Because we've all seen it haven't we: the two-year-old terror; tantrums on the supermarket floor; snatching a toy from a playmate; certain four letter words directed at parents, and telling them what to do; and screaming when they don't get their own way. Some of that may simply be part of growing up. And some of it hints at behaviour that will be ingrained for life. We can't take it for granted. If we think it is important, then we will take time and care to ensure it is taught and lovingly instilled.

We could all quite easily and happily, I'm sure, make a long list of virtues we would like to see instilled in the young: kindness, gentleness, respect, hard work, honesty... But if we want to see it in the young, we had better be sure it is firmly set in ourselves as well! Perhaps one of the more difficult virtues to instil and accept is patience. The physiology of a child's brain and their understanding of their place in the world does make this difficult. Still, we learn to wait in line, for example. There was good sense in our teachers lining us outside the classrooms quietly before lesson. We learn to wait our turn, to not push in, to sit still at the doctor's waiting room. Again, not just for order and tranquillity in the home or school or the street. But as a skill for moving through life. Because patience is a sign of our respect for others; it means we will *not* insist on our place always being first; it helps us not to expect immediate results first time up; that we have to persevere, put up with knock backs and set backs; it means we will be gentle with ourselves in our failings and faults. And more importantly, more gentle and understanding with the failings and faults of others. Patience is indeed a virtue.

It is this concern for patience – godly patience – that lay at the heart of the first parable we hear in today's Gospel portion. The gospel writer Matthew continues the images of the field and of wheat that were introduced last week. But he takes these images in a different direction. He introduces us to the dilemma of *weeds* in the field. Now, more than any of the other gospel writers (Mark, Luke and John) Matthew is the *Gospel of the church*. He shows particular concern for the right order and discipline of the church. None of the gospels shy away from the issues that surround human weakness and sinfulness. But Matthew in particular shows how these issues play out in the life of the church. He is perhaps more sensitive to this because Matthew is keenly aware of the new and emerging identity of the church as the infant Christian community drifts and finally splits from the synagogue. The synagogue had very clear ways of understanding itself and how to order and discipline itself. It is unclear whether Matthew regrets the separation. But what is clear the law of Jesus Christ establishes something new and definitive in our ordering and relationships with each other.

So, Matthew is aware that the community of those who identify with Jesus Christ is a pretty mixed bag, containing evil as well as good. And we hear the extremes of how mixed this bag really is. The weeds aren't simply untidy inconveniences: they are the 'subjects of the evil one', sown by the devil! The image is extreme, and it's meant to be. While the work of the kingdom unfolds, and as the gospel is proclaimed, we see Jesus warn his followers that a powerful opposition is at work. Now, the reason why God does not immediately intervene is that the struggle within the human heart is so subtle, so delicate, that the attempt to root out the evil may also destroy the good. This idea is expanded in the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast: a little but goes a long way; a tiny bit of faith may eventually bear much fruit; the coldest and darkest of hearts may eventually be captured by God's burning grace and set the world on fire! *God* is patient, prepared to put up with the evil along with the good, until the time for the harvest has come.

It is the image of God's patience with us all, then, that Matthew puts before us as the mark of the Christian community. Unlike the religious zealots of every age, God is *not* inclined to root out evil so ruthlessly that good is also suppressed, and a *possible* good thwarted. The sense of the Gospel is that it is better to give grace time to work its victory slowly but surely.

Often it is the hardest sinners that make the greatest saints. But we do see this impulse towards an ideal of an untainted and uncorrupted body persist: the vision of a pure religious utopia remains attractive. We see it being played out in the Middle East as the evil regime of ISIS continues its reign of terror. From our own history, we are reminded of the Inquisition and the wars of the reformation. They all reflect the idea that the religious community is better off without anything that challenges a very narrow idea of what it means to be pure and godly.

Anglicanism has had a pretty strong and robust tradition of accommodating a wide spectrum of belief and practice. It is both a gift and a curse of our church. I give thanks that Anglicanism has a place for *my* quirks and idiosyncrasies. But I also give thanks I can be enriched by the oddness and challenges laid down by others. But *it is* hard work. It is easy to be monolithic, it is easy to be the same, or to belong to people just like me. It is rather a nice idea that we could expel, excommunicate or exclude those who differ from us or don't agree with us. It is hard work to keep it all together. Of course, many former Anglicans would argue that many parts of the church have gone too far in abandoning essential Christian truth. But I maintain the tension is worth persisting with. The struggle to hold it together is worth the heartache and frequent disappointment, if for no other reason than in humble obedience to the God who is so patient with us.

We must, though, add a word of caution here. The patience we seek to realise is not an ecclesial free for all; it is not say that we can believe and do as we wish; that there will remain a place for all no matter what. Tolerance of itself *is not* a Christian virtue. There *is* a truth worth insisting upon and worth fighting for. We worship and adore Christ the Truth, not Christ the good idea, or Christ the path to enlightenment, or Christ the one among many. Of late the church has taken wrong turns. Some parts of the church do cross the line and depart from the faith.

This is why it is important to read all of scripture together. Elsewhere Matthew gives very clear guidelines about how to deal with those who stray. And Saint Paul is continually berating and correcting churches that abandoned and corrupted the pure Gospel he proclaimed.

But in the tension to be faithful to the truth of the Gospel remains the overarching challenge of God ever patient, ever merciful, ever calling the best out of us, ever offering us the life of grace. Yes, we are a mixed bag. And as we journey toward God in the life of faith, we pray and hope others too may avail themselves of the mercy of God. The Gospel remains ever hopeful, optimistic that the good will win out. Let us give thanks that God is patient with us, and gives us all time to turn to repent, to turn to him, to commit ourselves anew to his call and the life he offers. Amen.