

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 16 Year A 2020

Most of us most of the time seek to live our lives in an ordered, predictable, stable fashion. Few of us enjoy disorder and chaos. We like the things we like. We like to do things our way. A lot of things, perhaps even most of things that structure our days, weeks and lives are simply based on temperament, taste, even ease and convenience. And nothing wrong in any of that. We would soon descend into madness if each day we had to work out every detail of how we were going to steer our way through it all. We need order and predictability really to free us up to concentrate on the things that matter. If we doubted the role stability and predictability play in our lives just note how disturbing and unnerving corona virus has been for us.

Even if we construct our lives around our temperaments and tastes, as part of a society - as communal animals - we need to also find ways to accommodate and put up with the tastes and temperaments of others. Mostly, we manage this quite well. Every now and then there may be a few hiccoughs and rumbles which unsettle conventional civility. But we cannot take this tolerance, forbearance, civility for granted. Because every now and then it isn't just hiccoughs and rumbles, but it disintegrates dramatically and sometimes even violently.

Amongst the church's feast days commemorated this past week - St Bonaventure and Our Lady of Mt Carmel among them - was the secular celebration of Bastille Day, the French National Day on 14th July. Even if we might want to celebrate France and the French - their culture, their history, and their achievements - I would suggest we do not really want to celebrate what this day commemorates. Beneath the veneer of *fraternité, égalité, liberté* is a reminder of the very thin veneer of civility that surrounds us. How easy it is for tolerance, forbearance and charity to be dispensed if someone gets in the way and expresses an alternative position.

Under the notorious Robespierre, the euphemistically named 'Committee on Public Safety' saw that 40,000 met their ends under the blade of guillotine. And executed for no other crime than being noble or a member of the clergy or for failing to accept wholesale the 'program of reform'. The revolutionaries argued their actions were justified under the cloak of 'liberation'. But in an Orwellian Newspeak kind of fashion, liberation for some, of course, was quite the reverse for others.

The arguments echo through centuries. If not repeating then certainly rhyming. *Wherever* revolution captures the public imagination - whether Paris, Moscow, Beijing, Tehran or now even New York - it is always a bloody, ruthless, *unforgiving* affair. Revolutionaries of whatever place and from whatever time (even our own day!) display *a singular inability* to show either accommodation let alone forgiveness for the perceived faults of others. There is always – always – a harshness and a cruelty. Always the need to tear down, destroy, even to kill.

Of course, the church itself has not been exempt from this. Indeed, one of the sorriest stories of the church were the wars of the Reformation. The blood shed in the name of the gospel *continues* to be a scandal, a cause for unbelief - or at least an excuse for unbelief - for many. How often, in the imagery of the gospel parable today, do we seek to pull out the weeds?! How often do we seek a pure, uncontaminated church, a church in line with my tastes, and preferences and convictions and will do anything to secure this? Too often in the story of the church those who don't fall into line can just be got rid of! Or we might find offence at the differences, give up in disgust and walk away.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds surely grows out of the very experience of the church to which Matthew writes his gospel. A young church, of course, made up at best of first- or second-generation believers. A high percentage of this church, it seems, were Jewish (not gentile) Christians. And maybe some in the congregation knew Jesus personally or at least the apostles.

We can imagine for Matthew's community what occurs in so many endeavours. It all starts out with so much idealism and optimism and enthusiasm only to then discover, not so far down the track, that it is made of people just like us. Despite the idealism and good intentions, we discover people that are as dull and flawed and sinful as we are. Differences in taste and temperament emerge. And differences in belief. Differences in conviction. And unless a way is found to deal with these, it can all collapse very quickly. For Matthew's church one of these particular issues was how much of *Jewish* identity could be carried into *Christian* identity. Are they Jews first who happen to believe Jesus fulfils the messianic hopes of their people? Or does Jesus affect a whole new reality? This is *not* simply a question of taste or preference. This is a serious theological issue which this Gospel in part seeks to nut out. It was surely an issue in which heated and passionate opinions could be expected. An issue in which some may have insisted that if you don't get on board, then you're out of here...

The parable today, then, is an argument for tolerance and forbearance, for diversity even. In the vast overview of scripture and of the teachings of the church we know that this is not an argument for ‘anything goes.’ And the seed of weeds are cast by the devil. There is a seriousness here. Division is not part of God’s design. And there is still a parameter, a fence. There is still the garden, the field in which the wheat is sown which of necessity is *contained*. The evangelist himself recognises the parameters of true belief and practice. In chapter 18 Matthew outlines very carefully how the sins and faults of those in the church are to be dealt with. First approach them directly. If they fail to listen, take one or two others. If that fails to move the offender, then bring them to the church. And if that too brings no good, they are to be cast out. The gospel here does not envisage disputes over taste or preference, but sin that cannot go unchallenged.

Within our Anglican church one of the great blessings has been the *via media*, the ‘middle way’. Frustrating and imprecise at times, yes. But it allows for a big tent. It allows for us! It’s important to remember this when on the one hand liberals despise us and wish us to get with the program and evangelicals don’t understand us and wish us to be Calvinistic puritans. There are times when both these polarities are beyond the ‘fence’ of apostolic faith. But our church also holds to a principle of *adiaphora*: ‘things indifferent’. On the essentials we seek to remain firm. But on things secondary, there is a fair degree of wiggle room. And in that, a generous accommodation. As catholic Anglicans we need to *continue* to insist on our place in the big tent. Because we give legitimate expression to *the fullness* of apostolic faith. But if others don’t see things as we do, or act in ways we think are odd or wrong, we shouldn’t too readily jump to the seat of judgment.

The reading from the book of Wisdom today reminds us, *God judges with mercy. Mercy! God is mild in judgment. Who governs with great lenience.* How true this is! With Matthew’s principle of ‘consider the log in your own eye’, we ought to *personally* consider how *we* have flouted God’s rule and holy law; how *we* have been unfaithful in the commandments, lax in our witness to the faith, half-hearted in our commitments to the disciplines of the church; calculating in our generosity; silent in our defence of human life; weak in our convictions. Yes, the Lord is merciful, lenient, mild!

If we consider God's patience, his forbearance on us, it might help us look at each other more kindly and with greater generosity of heart. The differences amongst us - even in our own denomination, perhaps even in our congregation - may rile and disturb us. But the mustard seed grows into the largest of shrubs. A little bit of yeast goes a long way. And a bit of love goes a long way. In the end, as the gospel parable reminds us, all sins and failings will be dealt with by our merciful God. Amen.