

An Address by Nigel Guthrie for Sunday 19th July 2020

I'm sure that any of you who have a garden or allotment will feel some sympathy for the person described in Jesus' parable today. We dig the soil and carefully remove the weeds. Then we plant our crops or flowers and wait for them to grow. But if we neglect them for a day or two the weeds we did not want are as tall of the plants we hoped for. I'm not sure who plants the weeds in my vegetable patch, but they do a pretty good job!

This parable of the wheat and the tares is about judgement. Jesus recognises that his disciples must live alongside evil people as well as good ones. But in the end The Son of Man will come to sort out the evil from the good, with appropriate rewards being allotted.

Well that's one way, and perhaps the most obvious way, of reading the parable. But perhaps the field with the good crops and the weeds growing together might also be an uncomfortably accurate picture of our own lives? All of us have the capacity for goodness, for kindness, for generosity and for patience. But we also have to come to terms with our less attractive features; our selfishness, our laziness, our greed and our desire always to be right; to mention but a few! Much as we would like our best aspects to flourish, it is not always the good that comes to the surface. Or as St Paul puts it so pithily in Romans chapter 7 '*For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*' The uncomfortable truth is that we must learn to live with our less attractive features and to manage them as well as we can to avoid harming others and ourselves.

And the good news of Jesus gives us real hope when we might despair at ourselves. He assures us that God loves us despite our failings. Jesus calls us to repentance, to turn away from sin and despair, and assures us that we are forgiven through his death and resurrection. This is why I deeply value the opportunity to make a confession during our acts of worship. We are openly admitting that we have fallen short of what God intends for us, but also acknowledging that nothing, not even our worst failings, can separate us from the love of God which is shown to us in Christ Jesus. It is a different sort of mixed economy that St Paul addresses in today's reading from chapter 8 of his letter to the Romans. He teaches that alongside the hopes and longings of life we also have to come to terms with its sufferings. Our recent experience of the Covid 19 virus has reminded us that however sophisticated our society may seem and however advanced our medical knowledge, we can't always protect ourselves from the world around us. We have so much to be grateful for here in the south-west of England. Although there have been deaths from the virus we have had far fewer casualties than in many places. And whatever we may think of the government response to the pandemic we must be grateful that we live in a country where medical assistance is freely available. Yet the threat of further suffering is still with us. Back in March we hoped that the pandemic would be firmly behind us by now. But in fact, rather like the wheat and the tares, it looks as if we are going to be living with this threat in our midst for some time to come.

St Paul seems to me to reject the idea that suffering is a punishment from God. Because he sees that the whole creation is groaning in labour pains, as he puts it. Although I had the intensely moving privilege of being present at the birth of both my sons I am very grateful not to have had to go through labour pains myself! But labour pains are usually necessary for new life to come into being. They are bearable because there is hope of the new child who will shortly come into the world. And even in the darkness, suffering and anxiety of the Covid-19 pandemic there have been signs of hope all around. Many people, especially in the city have appreciated green spaces and paths for the first time and have enjoyed watching birds in their gardens. Sales of bird seed soared! And levels of pollution fell dramatically. And appreciation was expressed for those who serve us quietly and without fanfare year on year, not just the doctors and nurses, but the shop workers, delivery drivers and bin collectors. And then there was the extraordinary centenarian Captain Tom Moore who was knighted this week! How can we keep this spirit of hope alive? When Saint Paul describes the whole creation groaning in labour pains he not only speaks of the inescapable suffering of the present time which afflicts human beings in many forms, but he also affirms that as Christians we suffer in hope of what God has prepared. In Paul's magnificent vision the whole creation will be set free from its bondage to decay and enter into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. This is a key text for us in these days of ecological anxiety when the climate crisis is increasingly part of our daily consciousness. On bad days it seems as if the world is hurtling towards melt-down with a good deal of help from our human family! But the suffering of the created order is not without hope and part of our calling as Christian is to keep hope alive for individuals and for our society and world. The suffering of mental and physical illness, of bereavement and of loneliness often seems hard to bear. We wish to make it better, we wish to be free of it, sometimes we seek to numb it. But St Paul makes this extraordinary claim that we will be free of suffering and will enter into the fullness of God's glory. He rejoices in the fact that the sufferings of the present cannot even compare with the glory that God has prepared for us. He also warns us that we can't see hope and that we have to wait for it with patience. But we do have glimpses of hope; in the best of human nature, in the beauty of creation and in the presence of God with us that breaks into our prayers and worship to bring, joy, hope and peace.