

## The Wheat & Weeds : the problem of evil.

### Lectionary readings :

Genesis 28:10-19a *The ladder to heaven — ‘Jacob’s ladder’*

Romans 8:12-25 *Heirs of God. ‘The sufferings we now endure bear no comparison with the promised glory’.*

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 *The parable of the wheat and the weeds. (omit 36 - 43 : Matthew’s own interpolation)*

Our readings today offer us three enormously powerful visual images, each of them offering some sort of handle on how to grapple with the problem of evil in God's world — that is, how there can be such evil if God is indeed good.

Let me remind you of them :

Jacob’s revelation of a ladder stretching up from earth and disappearing out of sight into heaven. Angels are climbing up and down the ladder — holy, hidden beings; messengers and servants of God busily, quietly, going about their business unseen to the naked eye but for a moment revealed to Jacob. He’s had a glimpse into the hidden busy-ness of hosts of angels working behind the scenes of life. Jacob himself reckons that there’s something special and holy about this place he is in and he gives it a special name. It’s what some people might call a ‘thin place’ where the sense of God is more powerful than it is in daily life; where you get a sense of the holiness underlying (or in Jacob’s story, *overlying*) everyday reality. Iona has been called a ‘thin place’. Maybe you can think of your own ‘thin places’.

But is there any reason to suppose that there aren’t ladders from earth to heaven in *all* places? — just that we don’t see them? Were it to be revealed to us, would we not sense a ladder stretching up to heaven from this place, at this moment, with angels quietly climbing up and down it, carrying our little petitions upwards and bringing messages down to us from the throne of glory? Think about it for a moment . . .

Then we have two further images that are more obviously to do with pain, suffering and evil.

The first (in Matthew’s Gospel) is an image of the harvest. Weeds have got in amongst the good wheat. When the disciples ask how the weeds got there, Jesus’s reply is “some enemy has deliberately sown them.” It wasn’t the farmer’s idea that they should be there — it’s the last thing he wanted. Don't blame God! But given that someone seems to have maliciously sown them, the farmer has to put up with them. To go in and uproot the weeds would mean having to pull up the good wheat with them. There’s nothing to be done about them — for now. But the time will come. The harvest time will come when the whole crop is harvested and fulfils its purpose. The good purpose of the good wheat is fulfilled — it becomes a valuable, life-giving harvest. As for the weeds, well, they’re separated out and chucked on the fire. They had their time in the sun, sucking the nourishment away from the wheat. They had no ultimate purpose. As Jesus put it (referring to people — mostly rich people — who were having it good at the expense of the poor) : “don’t worry about them; they’ve had *their* reward.”

What a fantastic image that is! There’s a brilliance about Jesus’s parables that is spoiled if you try too hard to interpret them. Matthew himself can’t resist giving his own

interpretation of this parable, but I've deliberately left that bit out of our reading this morning because I want the parable to remain as this powerful open-ended image of the harvest of the wheat and the weeds : the harvest that is just around the corner and could come any minute. We could think of it in an individualistic sense as a weeding out of all the dross in our lives. Or again, we could think of the weeds as all the suffering in the world, which, when the harvest comes, will be done away with for ever.

The interpretation closest to Jesus's own meaning (here I go — interpreting it!) is probably that that sees the harvest as a promise of the time when all the parasite-people in our world — those who suck the life out of society and contribute nothing to it — are dealt with. But before we start jumping to conclusions about who the 'weeds' are, remember that it is we in the rich world who are sucking the life out of the planet, and sucking the life out of the poor — it was the self-serving powerful people that were in Jesus's sights. Yes, the parable could be about those no-hopers who make life a misery for everyone else, but maybe they deserve pity precisely *because* they're no-hopers. It is we, who claim to have hope and a reason for living, who need to ask ourselves whether, on the global scale, we're wheat or weeds. And yes, I'm talking about Fair Trade, and Make Poverty History, and global warming. It's unfair trade and squandering of the earth's resources that make us into weeds.

So : the parable of the weeds growing amongst the wheat, sown by some 'enemy,' that have to be left there for the time being — a tremendously powerful image.

And then there's our third powerful image, which comes from Paul. The pain and suffering in the world (he's thinking particularly, I think, of the suffering of the first Christians in his early Christian communities) is a *good* suffering — good in the sense that it isn't a sign that anything is fundamentally wrong. Paul likens it to the pain and suffering of childbirth. Childbirth, though dangerous, is not an illness. It's a painful process that brings a new life into the world.

Paul plays fast and loose with the image. In one sentence, he seems to be talking about the pain in the world as the pain of the mother who is giving birth. In the next he seems to be talking about the pain of the unborn child, waiting to be revealed to the world. He doesn't seem to see the need to remind his readers that the pain of childbirth was visited on Eve in the Garden of Eden as a result of her desire to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In eating the fruit she discovered the pain in the world. (There's no suggestion in the text that the pain of childbirth was a punishment from God. More that, since her eyes were opened, she discovered the reality of the pain through which new life is born.)

This latter image of the whole creation groaning in pain as it tries to give birth to the new people that God is wanting to create has been very important to me in recent years as I've sat by the bedside of people going through the deep waters. It's informed my prayers and given me hope. I hope it's also given *them* hope. The Universe is not finished yet. The Creator is still working to bring it to fruition, and the process is painful. The process is painful for the Creator, too. Unlike the parable of the wheat and the weeds, in which the Creator is likened to the farmer — whose personal involvement is more like that of a judge, sorting the wheat from the weeds and chucking the latter on the fire — here, the Creator is *also* going through the pain of giving birth to something new. And isn't that right? Isn't that what we see happening in Jesus? Jesus himself is treated as if he were the weeds in his society — a movement to be rooted out and destroyed. But we have come to see the suffering on the cross, with its final cry "It is

accomplished! It is finished!”<sup>1</sup> as the great sign of the Creator at work amongst us in a human life, dying in childbirth to give us life.

So our readings offer us a glimpse into things going on at a deep level in our world : a level deeper than the pain and suffering in the world. They speak of a purpose beyond the suffering — a coming moment when the weeds are separated out, the baby is born. The angels moving up and down the ladder are preparing for that moment.

Maybe that moment is yet to come. During communion we will say the words “Christ will come again”. Maybe that is the harvest moment, the moment of childbirth, for which we long (with some trepidation). That could be a source of hope, but it could also make us lazy — as if all we have to do is grit our teeth and hang on. As if we don’t need to actually do anything different. Just reassure ourselves that we are the wheat and it’s ‘them others’ that are going on the fire.

But maybe the harvest moment, the birth moment, has *already been*, as Jesus died and the Christ was raised from death. In which case, we are not in a waiting game at all : we are called to be the bearers of new life in the world *now*. And if we find ourselves anxious about the pain and suffering that seems to persist in our world, to draw hope from the sense that the angels still ascend and descend the ladder, quietly working to bring the promise to fulfilment, if only we could see them.

Dick Wolff  
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<sup>1</sup> John 19 : 30