

**23 July 2017 (6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity)**

**St Andrew's Church, Cobham**

**Isaiah 44.6-8; Romans 8.12-25; Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43.**

**The Wheat and the Weeds**

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I'm afraid this is going to be one of those difficult sermons about a very difficult passage in the Bible.

In our reading from Matthew this morning Jesus tells us that the world as we know it is going to come to an end at some point. At that time, everyone will be judged. Some will be thrown into the fiery furnace, and some will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

So, just to recap, this morning's sermon has to cover the end of time, the Second Coming, the final judgement, the devil, death and hell.

Well, no-one said it would be easy.

There is so much written about these things, and so many different interpretations of them, and they are so hard to deal with, that it is tempting to avoid it all. But Jesus teaches about them, and so they are as much a divine revelation as anything else in the Gospels. This means we must give them serious consideration.

I think the best thing to do is for me to give you my personal understanding of this passage and to emphasize that there are other theological points of view. I may be wrong – it has been known to happen!

There is a lot of ground to cover, so let's buckle up and get going.

First, **the end of the world**. Is that really going to happen? Yes. The entire message of the Bible is that God created the world, things have gone wrong and he is putting them right. The original creation of Genesis will become the new creation described in Revelation [Rev 21.1]. This is the whole point of Jesus being born into our world – not to teach us to be nice, but to establish what he called the kingdom of heaven – a creation where God rules completely. As St Paul writes, '[T]he whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present times,' [Rom. 8.22]. Everything we see around us now is being transformed into something new and perfect, where God's will is done. It is an ongoing process but the finale will be sudden and probably terrifying,

depending on where you stand. Jesus tells us there will first be signs of great upheaval in the world, like birth pains [Matthew 24.7]. Christians will be persecuted. Then all the nations will see the Son of Man coming with power and great glory [Matthew 24.30]. Do you know why this church, and most churches, face east? It is because Jesus tells us that his coming will be seen first in the east [Matthew 24.27], so the very positioning of the church reminds us to keep a constant lookout for the end of time.

Next, let's look at the idea of **judgement**. The gospels make it clear that part of the process of God's creation being renewed involves God's final judgement. Why should this be so?

The reason is that God hates evil, and cannot tolerate it in his kingdom. That means that there must be judgement, so that evil can be identified and removed. That being the case, why does he tolerate it now? Jesus tells us why in our reading. When the servants suggest pulling up the weeds, the owner of the field tells them not to, because the time is not right. The good seed has to spread and grow first, develop strong roots and good fruit. God's people have to be ready and strong before God will act finally against evil. So, for now, God tolerates evil. But in the end, it will be eradicated.

The judge will be the Son of Man - Jesus himself [Matthew 13.41], and those to be judged will be everyone who ever lived. There will be a general resurrection of both the good and the bad who will rise to be judged [John 5.24-9].

Now things start to get difficult. **Who will be judged to be weeds, and who will be judged to be wheat?**

Jesus tells us [Matthew 13.38-39].

**The weeds are the children of the evil one** – the evil one being the devil, Satan. Many people today scoff at the idea of the devil. I do not. Jesus clearly believed that there was such a being and, therefore, so do I. It is clear to me from the Scriptures that there exists a very powerful evil spirit, the Prince of this world, who has set up to challenge God and to turn people away from him. As Christians, we need not fear him, but denying his existence is dangerous.

The children of the evil one are those men and women who have followed the example of Satan in rejecting God and his values. Now please, let me make it clear that none of us is in a position to judge who they are. There are many people who struggle to accept the existence of God but who are still fine people of conscience, who hate evil and work for good, and we must trust that Jesus knows the true state of a person's heart and will judge accordingly.

But God gave man free will, and we have to accept that there will be many who choose to reject God and his values of goodness, and who pursue evil ends. We simply cannot look at the horrors of the world around us and say that there is no-one who has rejected God. Some people say that after death God will give everyone a second chance to turn to him and be saved. Perhaps.

If those are the weeds, **who are the wheat?** As Jesus explains, the wheat, the good seed, are the children of the kingdom - in other words, those who have submitted to the king; those who acknowledge the authority of God over their lives and surrender to it. Does that mean only Christians? Personally, I do not believe so. As Christians, we are chosen and privileged to hold a particular position as workers in the building of the new creation, Christ's body in the world. But there are many non-Christians who love and serve God according to what they know of him, and I believe that they too will be children of the kingdom (following C.S. Lewis).

And now we get to the most difficult part of our reading. **What happens to the weeds, to those who finally reject God's authority over their lives?** Jesus says they are thrown into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth [Matthew 13.42].

We are now getting into the extremely difficult problem of hell. It is difficult but we can't ignore it. Jesus refers to hell many times, using frightening imagery, and so it is part of the Gospel and we must take it seriously.

But at the same time, it is pointless to get into speculation about what happens in hell, whether anyone goes there, whether they suffer for all eternity or whether they are simply destroyed. So, what *can* we say about hell?

Speaking personally again, I think we can say this:

Firstly, no-one has the right to say that anyone else is going to hell – that is something we have to leave to God.

Secondly, I think that what we need to take from the gospels about hell is this: hell is the place where God is absent.

God loves us, and wishes to save us, but if we reject him, we cut ourselves off from him, and doing that is its own punishment, because we place ourselves in danger of painful suffering and the destruction of our souls.

And now, with some relief, which I am sure you share, I come to the last part of our reading: **what happens to the wheat, the children of the kingdom?** We must be careful of losing sight of the *good* news in all this. The good news is that

at the end of the age, when God's new creation is established in all its glory, those who love God will be so much a part of its glory that they will shine like the sun. As followers of Christ, we can rejoice in knowing that that is our fate. God's creation will be renewed and we can be sure that we will be there, loving God and being loved by him forever.

Amen.