

I might have to go under the knife. For the past six or seven weeks or so I've been moping around feeling rather sorry for myself. After decades of bad posture and not enough exercise my spinal cord has finally complained and I have what used to be called a split disk. It is actually a herniated disk and the gunge inside the disk is now pressing hard on my sciatic nerve. It is very painful. But you can't get toothpaste back into the tube, and you can't squeeze the gunge back inside the disk. I'm doing exercises, acupuncture and ibuprofen - but in the end they may need to cut me open and cut off the offending bit of gunge and relieve the pressure on the nerve.

Now why am I sharing my woes with you? I am sharing them because the moral of this morning's Gospel is a bit like the story of my back.

Let me explain. Guilty Christians - like us - imagine that Jesus must have been a Calvinist at heart. Some people go to heaven - believers - and the rest all go to hell. There are a number of variations of course, on what exactly counts as good, and what exactly counts as bad, but ***the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father and the evildoers will be thrown into the furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.***

That is after all what Jesus said.

And it doesn't sound like fun .. and as guilty Christians, we want to make sure that we are on the right side of the great divide. And, if we're honest, we'd rather like our families and friends, even those who don't believe in God at all, to be on the right side of that great divide.

It's not very comforting thinking that our best friends we go on holiday with, or our next door neighbours who come to our Summer BBQ or even our children and grandchildren for that matter, are all destined to Hell fire.

Now at this point I usually do all sorts of clever things with the Greek Text:

Jesus says that the good seed is the children of the Kingdom and the weeds are the children of the evil one ... but he doesn't explain whether the children in question are human children or angels, demons and imps. It seems a bit sloppy of Jesus to divide us up just into two groups - good and bad - and it sounds a bit too much like Calvinist predestination to me as well.

I find it hard to believe that some of us sitting in this Cathedral are children of the Kingdom shining like the sun, and all the rest are children of the Evil One sowing weeds and bad deeds.

from my personal experience I would say that most Church Congregations are made up of people who are both Children of God shining like the sun most of the time - but sometimes they are quite capable of sowing a few weeds and bad deeds - we all are!

What's more, I don't think dividing the world into good or bad people is the point of the parable.

As I said last week, Parables are meant to shock - and Jesus was not a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Calvinist, nor was he a 13<sup>th</sup> Century Scholastic for that matter - he was a first Century Palestinian Jew talking to first Century Palestinian Jews about agriculture - something they understood very well.

Most farmers wouldn't have lots of weeds in their fields, and most farmers wouldn't have an enemy who came in by night and sowed rubbish - but they could understand what that

would mean if they did. So Jesus is making a point – and answering that age old question ‘Why is there evil in the world?’ ‘Why do bad things happen to good people?’ Or as I would say it - why does my back hurt?

And his answer is realistic, simple, profound, and encouraging.

First of all Jesus’s answer is realistic. The world is simply not made up of 100% bad people and 100% good people – the world is like a field where good and bad is all mixed up together and we can’t always tell which is which. What is more the good and the bad is all mixed up inside each one of us as well and we can’t always tell which is which even in ourselves.

The news is full of politics: the refugee crisis, wars, moral conservatism, especially in Eastern Europe and parts of the USA – but the reality is none of these issues are clear cut. We all want to be welcoming, fair and just to refugees, we all want wars to end and people’s right to live in their own land and in peace to be respected, but working out what to do, and who is right and who is wrong is not quite so easy.

And don’t even begin talking about euthanasia and abortion ... it seems to me that euthanasia and abortion can both be terribly wrong and a great evil, and can also be the right thing to do under the circumstances. What neither of them are, are clear cut – good or bad.

So Jesus says – just as it’s not always possible to see the tares from the wheat, and even harder to pluck out the tares and leave the wheat intact – so it is with the world. Life’s complicated – he says – don’t be sucked into a naïve morality which sees everything as just right or wrong. Jesus is realistic.

Then he is simple - the field is a simple image – wheat and weeds growing side by side - we can understand it and we can see it – and we can see why they have to be left to grow side by side - but he is also profound. We are dealing with the deepest question of why evil exists at all in God’s good creation. God’s knows, we know that it does.

So Jesus says that the children of the evil one, and you can interpret them to be real children – like little demons if you like, or you can interpret them more like metaphorical children, such as pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony and sloth if you prefer – the seven deadly sins - but however you do it we have to live with it day by day and side by side. The world is a weedy field as well as a wheaty field.

Finally – and I think the best thing for a sermon – Jesus is encouraging. However guilty we may feel when this Gospel was read out - ‘*Am I a wheat or am I a weed*’ - Jesus is telling us that the Son of Man is in charge of the field, and knows what he is doing and that at the end of the age, in the Kingdom of God, we shall all be set free from the evil and sorrows and torments which beset us. The causes of sin, and the evils of this world will be finally thrown into the furnace of fire – where you can either think of them as being eternally destroyed, or you can think of them as being purified and redeemed. I prefer the latter.

But what, you might ask, about the weeping and the gnashing of teeth. Well this is where I return to my slipped disk and to my very painful sciatic nerve. At some point in the future I may have to go under the knife. The operation is messy and the recovery will be painful as back muscles reconnect and heal. I shall do a great deal of weeping, and wailing and

gnashing my teeth for several weeks - but eventually, God willing, the wounds will heal and I shall be pain free.

And when, in the end, I finally stand before my maker I know all too well that I shall not be a field of pure wheat but nor shall I be a field of pure weeds either – I shall be as mixed up as the field in the parable. I will have been faithful in many things, , but there are things I have done which I ought not to have done, and things I ought to have done which I have not done.

Like all people I shall need healing, restoration, forgiveness, absolution. Like all people I shall need to go under God's metaphorical knife and I might have to wail and weep and gnash a bit - But the difference between me, as a believing Christian, and the non-believer – is that I already know that I can trust the surgeon 100%. - it will be the death of death ! and Hell's destruction! When I land safe on Canaan's side.

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