

*Trinity 4 2011*

*An enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.*

Why, if God is all powerful, does he let the wicked prosper?

This question has bothered people since long before Jesus. There is a sense, when Jesus is telling the parables of the Kingdom of God that this is very much a live issue for his listeners. How can the kingdom of God be all around when there is so much evil?

The answer is given as a parable, one that his listeners would understand. If you grew wheat, the worst weed you could get in your crop was a plant called darnel. It is a grass species that can look quite similar to the grain crop until the ears ripen. Its seeds contain a soporific poison, so if it's not separated out it will ruin the crop. But because it looks so similar when young, it would be all too easy to pull out the wrong plant. As it gets more mature, its roots, which tend to be stronger than the cereal crop, become intertwined with those of surrounding plants, so to uproot it then would be to pull out many good plants too. By far the best way is to wait until the harvest, and then to separate it.

In terms of our behaviour, the message is clear, God knows what he is doing, let him be the judge. The good will inherit the kingdom, the evil will get their comeuppance.

As instructions go, this is one that we seem very reluctant to follow. We love to judge. We want to see that the wrong doers are punished. We want to see them pulled up and destroyed.

Why else would competitive talents shows where the losers are humiliated be given any air space? Why else would the now defunct News or the World love naughty vicar stories! It has been interesting to see the way in which public opinion has moved in response to the phone hacking stories and the demise of the News of the World and the possible – probable? - involvement of other papers. There has properly been outrage that police have been paid for information, that the vulnerable have been exploited, but more than that, there have been calls (now answered) for resignations, and prosecutions. The concern that these practices are the weeds that should have been pulled up long ago and now it is

judgement day has been merged with the idea that these people are the weeds that we now want to see punished.

But the question we really need to ask is who sowed the seeds?

The uncomfortable truth is that we all sowed the seeds.

If people not want to read about other people's lives, the intimate details, the sordid details, they would not be printed. If we refused to buy papers that posted stories about celebrities, or those that took delight in exposing other people's weaknesses - and it isn't just the red tops that do this - then perhaps things might change.

We have become a nation of observers, sitting on the edge and judging. We can read the papers, watch TV, read twitter or blogs and see into other people's lives, their hopes, their fears. As observers we can be detached, cynical, critical, or we can be sympathetic and concerned. We can condemn without having to put forward a better alternative. And in so doing, whatever we experience, we are experiencing it second hand. Whatever opinions we express, we are not putting ourselves on the line. It is safe. Safe pain, safe joy. It can engage us briefly, entertain us, give us topics for conversation, but if it changes us at all, it is only to make us more judgemental, more aloof, less involved.

Being involved, being a participant, is risky. It is not safe. The joy, the pain, the love, the sorrow, they are very real and they do change us, they change who we are as people.

And there are two questions for us, that arise out of this parable. The first is how do we stop the seeds being sown? And the second, is what are we? Wheat or weeds?

To stop the enemy coming in the night and sowing the seeds, we have to be vigilant. The racist comment, the inappropriate gesture, the passing on of gossip, the avoidance of tax, the fiddling of expenses – we know such things happen, and there will always be individual cases. But when they become part of the culture, become institutionalised, then the whole of society suffers. So each and every one of us has to do our best to ensure that we are not part of the problem and that we help others to understand that it is not acceptable. It just won't do to blame everyone else for the problem if we have not made a stand.

And as to whether we are wheat or weed, the truth is that it is difficult to say – sometimes we look like wheat and sometimes like darnel, because we are a bit of both. But unlike

either of those two plants, we can decide which we want to be. We have a choice. For the whole of our life, we have that ability to change. Through Christ we can be forgiven, start again. Until the day of judgement, and we do not know when that day will come.

This theme is central to the letter of St Paul to the Romans - the longest and weightiest of Paul's letters.

In this letter he writes down the insights that he has received from scripture, reason and experience. This text, written to those Christians, some of Jewish background, some of gentile background, 2000 years ago is still capable of firing up Christians today because he is telling the good news of salvation in Christ, but here, in Chapter 8, Paul addresses the reality for Christians in Rome. The great persecution in Rome had not yet begun, but Christians were distrusted and unpopular, and the threat of violence was in the background. Paul himself had suffered elsewhere, and knew first-hand about suffering. So he is encouraging the Christian community. Towards the end of this chapter he writes: Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword.

Not only that, but these sufferings are the scene of the victory, they are the birth pangs of a new age. This is not evidence that God is not in control or that he does not care, it is an inevitable part of the messianic purpose. Suffering can happen to anyone. It is terrible, but it is not evidence that we are separated from God's love. Christ is Lord. He has triumphed over death through the cross. None of these outside forces can damage our relationship with God – that is eternal.

Yet there is a flip side to this good news. If no outside powers affect our eternal life, in other words if nothing is predestined, then we can't blame anyone else for our behaviour and how we live matters. Running as a thread through Romans is not only the fact that we are loved by God and by Christ, but that Christ is judge. He is the one that will pull out the weeds and throw them in to the furnace.

So whilst nothing outside of us can separate us from the love of God, we can still choose to be separated. We do that through sin – through deliberately doing what is wrong and

harmful to others, turning our back upon God's love, or by assuming for ourselves the role of judge.

Let us thank God that he waits until the harvest before uprooting the weeds. It gives us time to change.

Amen.