

Sermon for the 9th Sunday After Trinity - preached at Holystone

Father Jim arrived after the interregnum. They all knew he was a very holy man. They knew he couldn't abide sin – so sinners had better beware! Imagine their surprise when, on his first Sunday he asked the wardens to direct smokers into the side aisles, leaving the central seats for non-smokers. In his sermon he warned that this is how it would be at the Final Harvest, with sinners being cast into outer darkness. Most of the smokers were amused at being used as a sermon illustration, but some never came again.

Sadly though, this comical segregation turned out to be an illustration of Father Jim's whole ministry. He and his close disciples gradually weeded out those with less than orthodox beliefs, those who were less than regular in church attendance, the divorced, those who gambled or who drank to excess.

The sad thing was that all of folk who he had condemned as 'sinners' were, in some way, actually saints - saints in the way they struggled with faltering belief, saints in the way they gave of their time to the community, in the way they put their family first even if it meant missing church which was so important to them. Father Jim and the church leaders had converted the church from being a hospital for sinners into a resort for "saints" who in any case were committing the sin of self-righteousness. They should have read the Parable of the Weeds.

In this parable, the farmer allows the weeds to flourish. And it's true – God's sweet, refreshing rain does fall on the unjust as well as the just. I am sure that most of us have asked ourselves why this is? Well, perhaps there are two reasons.

Firstly, the farmer recognises the danger that, in weeding, his workers might uproot the good along with the bad – by carelessness or because the workers genuinely mistake some wheat for weeds. That's my sort of gardening.

But secondly, this is how God intends his disciples - that's us - to live, alongside and among the unbelievers. There is a bit in the New Testament about our faith being tried in the fire: not that God does this deliberately, but without the real world and its temptations, our faith won't grow strong. Instead it will become rarefied and disengaged. The longer the tea stays in hot water, the stronger it gets. Our faith gets stronger through being challenged.

No matter how good they were, the workers would have made a mess of the

field and thrown out much that was good. Isn't it sadly true that that we, in the name of Christianity, sometimes discard people who don't fit in with our interpretation of the Gospel.

It is frustrating to have to wait for the harvest. We get impatient with God and think we can establish his kingdom on earth. Sadly, it always ends up being yet another *human* kingdom.

Sometimes it does seem that if we could just get rid of the influences that tempt us, then we could cope; belief and trust would be easy. But Jesus points out frequently to the punctilious Pharisees that life is never tidy, nor should it be. The route to a tidy, uniform world is the road followed by people like Father Jim. It is the road that leads, in extremis, to the Brave New World of Aldous Huxley.

So how are we to deal with mess meanwhile? The mess of wars, of injustice and cruelty? Listen again to Paul from today's Epistle: "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Romans 8:15-17).

This is how we will bear the frustration of waiting for the harvest. This is how we will be able to smile and get on with life meanwhile – because the Spirit of God dwells in us.

When God finally calls in the harvest - at the end of time perhaps, or actually when we first meet Him on the other side of death, we shall know about the Judgement of God. Now, this parable is not given to us to tell us about hell fire - Jesus is only using the parable to tell us about the need to live in the real world. He points out that there **will** be a harvest - as indeed the parable of the sower so clearly shows, but the sorting of the weeds and the good grain is a matter for God. In the farming communities in Palestine you burnt the weeds so that they did not spread their seeds any further.

I know that Jesus says that there will be a fire and there will be weeping and wailing and so on. I am not sure how to reconcile this with the God he shows us on the Cross - the God who loves us to death. So - for what its worth - my take on the judgement is that the punishment for sin and for deliberately rejecting God will be to be sent out of his presence. And that, having seen Him, must surely be punishment enough. Burning remorse. And certainly much weeping.

So yes, there will be a harvest, and a great sorting out. But we don't have to wait till then to draw near to God. He is near to us now, through the indwelling power of his Spirit. The power that enables us to call God "Father" is the same power that gives us patience in our hope. We hold within our grasp the power that will enable us to be in the world yet patient; with different people yet not judging; in the flux, yet resting in the Spirit's power, confident that, as God separates the wheat from the weeds, so also will he bring to perfection his whole creation – ourselves included.