

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 6th Sunday after Trinity – 19th July 2020

Service at All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

In an interesting pairing, the Lectionary today places our Gospel reading (the parable of the wheat and weeds) alongside the story of Jacob's ladder.

The tension between Esau and Jacob is one of the great accounts of sibling rivalry in the Old Testament. Jacob was born hanging onto Esau's heel, unhappy about being the younger twin. Esau was persuaded by Jacob to sell him his birthright for a portion of stew. Jacob then tricked his father Isaac into giving Jacob his blessing instead of Esau. When the deception is discovered, Esau plans to kill Jacob. But he is overheard by their mother Rebekah, who advises Jacob to flee to her family in Haran in order to escape his brother's anger.

At the start of our reading, therefore, we meet Jacob at a low ebb, alone and away from home. Like many others who have been in that situation, it is then that he encounters God. The place he is in is what is known as a 'thin' place, one where we sense more easily that a deeper spiritual reality lies beyond the material world. In a profound moment of encounter, the faith of Jacob's ancestors becomes his own faith, the call to his ancestors becomes his own call, and he will spend the rest of his life living it out. And Jacob is told he will be the founder of a family that will be chosen by God to be a blessing to 'all the families

of the earth'. Yet all this happens to someone who is on the run for deceiving his own family, someone whose behaviour we are surely not being asked to condone. How could God be working out the salvation of humanity through a person so obviously bad?

The parable of the wheat and the weeds, like the parable of the sower we heard last week, it is open to different layers of interpretation. It has been seen as a warning to the early Christian communities that, although they may have converted, it didn't mean they would become good people overnight. Reading the parable again this week, I was struck by the reaction of the servants to the discovery of the weeds among the wheat: 'Do you want us to go and gather them?' It made me conscious how, when people do things that disappoint us, we are sometimes apt to write them off. Our judgments of others are often binary: he or she is a 'bad' person, 'we' or 'they' are the good people. Let's get rid of the 'bad' people so that our world (whether on a small or large scale) will just be full of 'good' people. The human tendency to scapegoat is a sinister version of that response, and it can have terrible consequences for the person or people being scapegoated.

But God works in a different way. As Psalm 139 reminds us, he knows us much better than we know ourselves. He doesn't rush to judgment, but allows the weeds to grow alongside the wheat. One thing we learn from this parable is that quick, binary judgments do not take into account the possibility of redemption. One of the most significant figures in the Gospel story is the penitent thief – the one who hung alongside Jesus on the cross, recognising that he had done wrong and asking for forgiveness. In the last hour of his life Jesus promised him: 'This day you will be with me in paradise'. That is cause for hope. For we learn from

the parable of the wheat and weeds that the difference between good and bad is more complex than we might like it to be. If we are honest, we can see that our very lives are a mixture of wheat and weeds. But God judges kindly, and is more merciful than we are.

In France we have just been through the political season when reshuffles take place. Often in democracies, politicians are heralded as wheat when they come to power, but when their weeds begin to appear there is pressure to ‘go and gather them’ – to throw them out and have someone new who will be perfect. Well, there aren’t any perfect politicians, any more than there are perfect individuals. That’s the answer to our question about Jacob: how could God be working out the salvation of humanity through a person so obviously bad? The reality is that Jacob was good *and* bad, like everyone else. His time of self-examination in the wilderness, to which he had fled after his bad behaviour, brought him startlingly close to God, but there he experienced not condemnation but awe, welcome, kindness and hope. In one of the alternative Old Testament readings set for today, from the Wisdom or Solomon, there’s a sentence that reads: ‘You have taught your people that the righteous must be kind, and you have filled your children with good hope, because you give repentance for sins.’

Those are words for us to keep in mind whenever we are tempted to rush to judgment. I wonder if you have a friend or family member who has done something that everyone (including you) thought was wrong. You may have found yourself torn between judgment and compassion, knowing the good in them yet shocked by the revelation of what they have been capable of. If that has ever happened to you, take comfort from the parable of the wheat and the

weeds. Like the parable of the mote and the beam, we need to ask ourselves whether we are so perfect that we can point the finger at others as readily as we do. Might it not be better for us not to rush to judge others, not to jump to tear up their weeds, but to leave the judging to God?

Our task is to sow good seed where we can, to encourage good growth in others, and when in our turn we find ourselves having to ask God's forgiveness again - for letting God and others down, hurting the people we love, again - our consolation will be that, like Jacob, we discover that God is patient. Reminding us that tomorrow is another day in which his love and grace are new every morning. We are encouraged to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves down, to go out and love again. And if God can be patient with us, perhaps we can become a bit more patient with others.

The truth is that God works through the only people he has, wheat and weeds as they are, to bring about his purpose. Our task is to do what we can to help build the kingdom, responding each day to his prompting, listening for his voice. And, if we do, who knows? We may sense angels ascending and descending in the place where we are. Even if we are on the run from our bad behaviour, we may come to know that the Lord is in that place and we did not know it. For there are moments in all our lives when we realise we are in a place which is 'none other than the house of God, and the gate of heaven.' And that we are not alone in it. It may bring us to our knees in penitence, but it will also enable us to stand again.

Amen.