

We come from scattered lives to meet with God.

Let us recognise his presence with us.

As God's people we have gathered.

Let us worship him together.

What God has prepared for those who love him,

he has revealed to us through the Spirit;

for the Spirit searches everything.

Therefore let us in penitence open our hearts to the Lord,

who has prepared good things for those who love him.

Penitence: God of mercy,

we acknowledge that we are all sinners.

We turn from the wrong that we have thought and said and done,

and are mindful of all that we have failed to do.

For the sake of Jesus who died for us,

forgive us for all that is past,

and help us to live each day

in the light of Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Absolution: O King enthroned on high,

filling the earth with your glory:

holy is your name,

Lord God almighty.

In our sinfulness we cry to you

to take our guilt away,

and to cleanse our lips to speak your word,

through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, 16-19 [God is sovereign]

There is no god besides you, whose care is for all people,

to whom you should prove that you have not judged unjustly;

For your strength is the source of righteousness,

and your sovereignty over all causes you to spare all.

For you show your strength when people doubt the completeness of your power,

and you rebuke any insolence among those who know it.

Although you are sovereign in strength, you judge with mildness,

and with great forbearance you govern us;

for you have power to act whenever you choose.

Through such works 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.

This is the word of the Lord;

Thanks be to God.

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 [The Parable of Weeds among the Wheat]

Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn." '

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.' He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

This is the gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, **Amen.**

Today's Gospel reading, like last week's about the Sower and the Seed, is well-known to all of us.

Part of their attraction is that the gospel writer has Jesus interpret both of them. Which makes preaching on them a bit of a challenge, to say the least!

Something else that's difficult, too – the central point of our passage today is about the power of the Enemy; about Evil. That's not an easy subject!

We pray about it, though, in our central daily prayer: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” “Deliver us from Evil”. What do YOU mean by “Evil”? For that matter, what’s your attitude to “the Devil”? Is that an out-dated notion? Is evil an out-dated notion?

For me, it has been an uncomfortable notion; one which I have been happy to keep at a distance, if not to actually ignore. It’s certainly not a subject to which I am attracted. I’m not known as a hell-and-damnation preacher!

We don’t often hear it discussed in religious terms, except in some conservative evangelical assemblies, where they overdo it by worrying that evil is all around us and about to overwhelm us. They paint life as somehow scary; frightening; threatening.

No, we seem to prefer to preach about the positive aspects of Christianity, and treat evil as negative thinking.

Well, here’s a thing. Today’s parable tackles these concepts head-on. It goes for the jugular. It makes no bones about saying that evil exists. All around us.

But much more than just “all around us”. Evil is part of our nature. It’s entwined within us. In-separable from us.

Let’s look at some aspects of the passage that we can easily miss.

First, we’re told that Jesus PUT BEFORE his disciples another parable, in exactly the same way that Moses had PUT BEFORE the Israelites the commands the Lord had given him, in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

“Put before, or set before” is a particularly elevated way of saying that Jesus is about to give his people solemn, binding teaching. Matthew’s Jesus is almost drafting a constitution for the people of God.

Second: “the field” means “the world”. God, through Jesus, lays claim here not just to the Jewish nation, but to the whole world. Yet another indication that early Christianity saw the realm of God to be global – and for everyone.

Back to the text. One thing strikes me very forcibly. The enemy’s sowing of weeds doesn’t take place BESIDE the good sowing, but specifically, AMONG the wheat - right in the middle. Right in the middle.

And what’s most unsettling about this parable is that it is attempting to teach about the kingdom of Heaven.

“The kingdom of Heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field.” In the middle of OUR relationship with the kingdom of heaven, with God the Father, there is the presence of Evil – it’s intertwined with it. And it’s there at all levels of our relationship with God.

It’s there in our personal life. It can corrupt our morals, our ethics, our relationships with other people. It is embedded, too, in our Church. Think that through as it relates to the church. It surely means that the major work of the Evil One is not just outside the church, but in the midst of it. Right in the middle.

There's an unsettling old ditty:

"Wherever God erects a House of Prayer, the Devil builds a chapel there." I don't have to spell it out for you any more than that.

But before we get too upset about all this, remember that Matthew wrote his Gospel in the very early Christian church in Antioch, an ancient city in northern Syria. He and his community were being progressively barred from the synagogues of the city. The passage is present only in Matthew's Gospel, which reinforces my point. To make it more difficult, their early Christianity didn't have the full New Testament that we know; and so there were many people who had differing views of Christianity.

So with this parable, Matthew portrays Jesus trying to keep his disciples from discouragement, when from within Christianity there arose religious beliefs that denied God's way and power. The problem of evil, though, is one that we cannot ignore, however distasteful it may be. It is perhaps the most frequently raised problem of belief: "If God is a God of love, why is there so much – why is there any – evil in the world?"

And more specifically, if God is building a church in the world, why are there so many evil persons in her? And still closer to home, each of us should ask: Why is there so much evil in me? St. Paul, in anguish, in his letter to the Romans, put it clearly: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do NOT do what I want, but I DO the very thing that I hate. When I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand."

WHY? As the disciples might have asked: Why is this so? Who is to blame? Where did all these weeds come from? Why hasn't everyone responded to the Word; to the preaching of Jesus? Why is there so much resistance to him? If Jesus, and faith in Jesus, are the wheat of God, why is this wheat so surrounded by and infected with the weeds of unbelief?

All we get for an answer in the parable are four words: "**An enemy did this**" Yet this answer does supply us with a most important piece of information: "God did not do the evil work". I think it's neither healthy nor necessary for believers to delve much further into the metaphysics of evil than Jesus does when he explains that: "The weeds are the children of the Evil One, and the Enemy who sowed them is the Devil." Jesus and the early church believed in the devil – an Evil One, who sought to thwart the purposes of God. That is clear from the Temptations of Christ before he began his ministry - all three synoptic gospels share that same story. What does the parable teach us about dealing with – confronting – evil? What can we do about it? Jesus' response to the request to rip out those weeds is clear: "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them."

Is that not a little bit weak? To co-exist with evil rather than to cancel evil seems compromising; ineffectual. Jesus stops short of telling us to fight to the death the great evils of the world, such as poverty, domination, cruelty.

Instead, he commands us to non-violence in the treatment of our enemies. "At harvest time I will tell the reapers; collect the weeds first and bind them to be burnt; but gather the wheat into my barn".

Can we fall back on: "Trust in the Lord"? The very fact that we can acknowledge that Evil, or the Devil, is present in the world, is probably enough. I could sum that up by the oft-repeated dictum of the Hebrew Bible: "Judgement is mine, says the Lord." Or perhaps, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." Maybe the best thing we can do is always to remember to pray, "Deliver us from evil".

Which was my starting point. Amen.

And now to the one God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, majesty, dominion, power and glory. **Amen.**

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. **Amen.**

Intercessions, beginning with the Collect of the Sixth Sunday after Trinity

Merciful God,
you have prepared for those who love you
such good things as pass our understanding:
Pour into our hearts such love toward you
that we, loving you above all things,
may obtain your promises,
which exceed all that we can desire;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Let us pray that the Church and the world may be preserved from evil. Shield the Church against all that would damage her witness, from false doctrine, from pride, from indifference to life that seems to lie outside her care. Give her ministers wisdom to discern between good and evil and to guide their people in the right way.

Root out corruption in the high places of the world, where power is misused and rights are discarded. Strengthen and prosper those who work against difficulty to bring a better life for others.

May we seek to see and correct the wrong that is in ourselves, and to discern and foster what can be used for good. Protect this local community from all evil that threatens its peace, and let all live together in harmony.

Come in mercy to those who are sick: at home or in hospital: those still suffering because of COVID-19; those whose lives have been blighted by misfortune or false judgement, those whose hopes have been unfulfilled. Bring us all to the good harvest of your love.

Be merciful to your servants who have gone astray in this world and have been called to judgement. Restore in them your image of forgiveness and grant them a place with those who have kept the faith.

May all our prayers be accepted in the name of Christ. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
for ever and ever, Amen.

Dismissal:

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all evermore.**

Amen