

Pentecost 7 2020.

I had a visit from an old friend last week and we started talking about our children. My friend's youngest belongs to a group whose sole purpose is stated to be the bringing into being a society in which good overcomes evil. A noble ambition indeed and I hope that they succeed! In one of his many parables about the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus addresses the issue of the existence of evil in the world. We live with a paradox in which the Kingdom of God has come, and yet evil still flourishes. I expressed the sentiment to my friend that existential evil is an intrinsic part of the world in which we live.

This parable commonly known as the wheat and the tares probably uses example of a crop of wheat polluted by a weed called darnel - *Lolium temulentum* for those botanically inclined. To the uneducated eye it looks very much like wheat – it grows to about a metre and has a prolific seed head. Unfortunately, it is quite poisonous. To weed a crop before the seed head developed would be very hit and miss, probably losing a lot of wheat and leaving behind a significant amount of darnel. Once the crop is mature the differences between the plants becomes more obvious. So Jesus uses this wonderful agricultural example to talk about how the Son of God will deal with this problem of evil in the world. Harvest time 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.*

In this parable Jesus warns about taking matters into our own hands. The history of Christianity is littered with dark episodes in which the mission and Kingdom of God has been diminished by so called wars against evil. Identifying someone or some group or race of people as evil in order to diminish or destroy them has caused untold damage to our church and to the human race generally,

from the actions of the crusades to the persecutions of the Inquisition, to the murder of the Cathars and the slaughter of so many religious minorities in Europe or even the witch burnings.

So how do we deal with the problem of evil in this world? To attempt to root it out is to risk sitting in judgement, to cause more damage to this world than the evil or perceived evil is doing. Remember that the roots of the wheat and darnel are often intertwined. I believe that if we truly consider ourselves to be one of Christ's own then the best attack against evil is to have such a flourishing crop that it chokes out the efforts of the evil one.

Many years ago I had lunch with an army doctor who had been to Ruanda. I remember his words clearly. He said that when he disembarked the aircraft the very ground that he walked on reeked of evil – his words not mine. His distress was compounded by the fact that the perpetrators of this evil were in plain sight. All that he and his team could do was to bring whatever comfort that they could to the maimed and injured. As UN peacekeepers our troops could only try to do just that. Not to reek vengeance on the evil doers – we know that God will do that. My favourite blessing is eloquent on this subject – it is the one that we use after a baptism – it is part of our baptism charge:

Go forth into the world in peace; be of good courage; hold fast that which is good; render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the faint hearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; give honour to all; love and serve the Lord rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

So this is how I believe that we deal with the problem of evil in the world, a problem that has been with us since the beginning of human history and probably before that. But evil strikes closer to home. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote: *The battleline between good and evil runs through the heart of every man.* This is a truth that I readily acknowledge; the daily battle in my own heart and mind between that dark part of me that continually lurks and teases me to give it expression and the part of me that I know is the person that God calls me to be. I don't think that there would be one person alive who doesn't fight this battle in one shape or form. Our psalm for today is a very important one

to me. The first time that I really became conscious of it was when I began my journey of discernment for ordained ministry and Dianne and I met with a most wonderful man, the late Canon Lyall Turley, who was then the director of ordinands and spiritual formation. At the end of our meeting Lyall read that psalm, slowly, purposefully and concluded with prayer. He let me sit with God's word as a reminder that, firstly I may be able to fool myself and all of the examining chaplains, but I would never fool God, and that God knew all my thoughts and that God had a plan for me that would give me the strength and reassurance for the daily battle.

There is a delightful story of an old Cherokee chief who was sitting around a fire one night with his grandson. He told the grandson that we all have two wolves inside of us – a good wolf who seeks to advance our welfare, and an evil wolf who continually tries to get us to take the wrong path with false promises. These wolves are always fighting each other. The grandson inquired – Grandfather – which wolf wins? His grandfather replied – the one you feed.

So we know that we have to deal with evil in the world in which we live and evil within ourselves. Saint Paul gives some great advice to the Roman Christians who would have been very conversant with dealing with evil on a daily basis: *I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*

“All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.”

– **Julian of Norwich.**