

JULY 19TH: Sermon for St George's Eastergate.

As we study God's Word together as part of our act of worship it is important I think to do a 'rain check' first. What I mean by this is that at the outset we need to look at where we are at in our daily lives and then try and understand what God is saying to help us. With that in mind it seems to me that on most of our minds at the moment is what plans can we make; what can we expect to be happening in September after the holidays? what will it be possible to do next Christmas? Etc etc. Let's remind ourselves of the opening words of the Collect today as we contemplate this uncertain future. " Merciful God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as pass our understanding: do we really believe that?..that's the challenge!

In our Gospel readings at the moment we are being reminded of the parables of Jesus that teach about the growth of God's Kingdom. Very apt teaching for this season this year when many of us have been spending more time on our gardens than usual. The teaching of Jesus was drawn from familiar farming life. Farmers and gardeners know all about hope don't they. When seeds are sown the sower hopes for growth and then waits in this hope. The farmer in this story that Jesus told had a bold hope of an excellent harvest despite the very practical reservations of

his slaves who, doing the weeding, saw the problems at first hand...weeds! In Jesus' explanation we can see the lessons learnt in agriculture applied to spiritual issues. There will indeed be a harvest, a spiritual harvest, we are right to wait in hope, but until then evil is allowed to continue, ironically to avoid destroying the good. Maybe that is why in our present situation in the midst of what seems a tragic pandemic, we have seen caring human beings behaving in a way, a self sacrificial way, that is not in more normal times usually seen. This sort of behaviour we have seen and still do see in times of war and violence. This tension, in the parable between weeds and healthy plants, we see both in the world around us and in our own natures with the daily battle between our old and regenerated natures.

In our Epistle we read words that St Paul wrote to Christians in the city of Rome in the first century AD. We think we are living in turbulent times but imagine what it was like for people living in the turbulence of the mid 50's in first century in Rome! The Emperor Claudius had expelled between 40 and 50,000 Jews from Rome at the end of the previous decade. When he died in AD 54 returning Jewish Christians found the church had changed and was now predominantly Gentile. Inevitably there was tension. Who finds it easy to accept it when something we love changes in our absence?...church for instance! In this letter to the Christians in Rome we see that Paul believed in a cosmic outworking of salvation...the sufferings of the present age

he says are in a state of tension but are not without hope. In other words when unexpected changes are occurring God is still working His purposes out despite present tensions. So, if we look at the message for for us in our situation, we can find ourselves being encouraged by Paul to see ourselves, in the suffering and changing world around us and in a human existence which itself battles with evil daily, as part of a dying old world and an emerging new one. This message applies not just to our sinful natures but to the natural world around us as well. That is why Christians must be caught up along with everyone else with ecological issues. The natural world is badly affected by humans not following God's original plan of taking care of it. This created world, Paul says, even though it is being subjected to futility, is now waiting with eager longing for a glorious future! That phrase 'with eager longing' was translated by JB Phillips as 'on tiptoe'...creation waits eagerly on tip toe to see what God is going to do; and of course what God does will be through his people!

Paul's thinking may be a bit academic and difficult to grasp at times but he gives us 2 very clear images in this passage that can be understood and cherished by all of us. The first image is that of adoption. "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 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..” This is a very powerful image...as adopted children we are caught up with God in His plans...we are in the family. When we make our commitment to God our Father and begin our new spiritual pilgrimage the assurance that our new life has begun is the way that God really becomes to us a Father...we can speak to him in intimate and close terms and know that he loves us. In human terms we can see what a difference it can make to someones life to be given a new start in a loving family...it is our knowledge of this human situation that helps us to understand how God can act in our lives...what an encouragement! It was the same for Paul; this example that he uses is drawn out of the culture of his day where it was everyday life for people to be slaves to people wealthier than themselves who might treat them badly or generously; and we do know that in some circumstances a generous slave owner did set a slave free and indeed adopt him or her into his own family. Paul had this experience of everyday life before his eyes when he made the link with how God shows his generosity to us. In our day we see a very similar example...immigrants are flocking from horrific situations to a safer world only to find that they can be either treated as slaves with a pitiful lifestyle and minimum wage for slave labour or adopted by the parent country and treated with generosity and love. How God treats us should be the way that we treat others!

The other image Paul uses is one of the most vivid images of hope; that of birth pangs. The whole creation, says Paul, is in labour, longing for God's new world to be born. We, the church, are called to share that pain and that hope. The church is not to be apart from the pain of the world; it is to be in prayer at precisely the place where the world is in pain..that is part of our calling.

So let me finish by using again, as I did at the beginning of this sermon, the start of our Collect for today..."Merciful God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as pass our understanding." May God help us all to rejoice in the hope that our Father God is in control of our suffering world; that he loves us so much that he has included us in the intimacy of family life by adoption; and given us the assurance of firm hope in a glorious future despite the pains of this present life.

AMEN.