

## **Mistrust all in whom the impulse to punish is powerful.**

Sermon for the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 19 July 2020

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

### **The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell**

Isaiah 44: 6-8; Psalm 86: 11-17; Romans 8: 12-25; Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

+In the name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

I start with some words of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*—hardly the words of a Christian prophet, though not too far from Jesus' parable in today's Gospel, and his explanation of it:

But thus I counsel you, my friends: Mistrust all in whom the impulse to punish is powerful. They are people of a low sort and stock; the hangman and the bloodhound look out of their faces. Mistrust all who talk much of their justice! Verily, their souls lack more than honey. And when they call themselves the good and the just, do not forget that they would be pharisees, if only they had—power.

And don't we see Nietzsche's insight borne out everywhere? On the political right, especially the gun-totin Evangelical right in America, the world is full of villains who have to be got rid of or at least got under firm control: immigrants, uppity blacks, women who challenge

traditional gender roles, ‘bad hombres’ from South of the border, lefties worried about climate change when they should be worried about the collapse of Christian values, and so on. Yet on the left there’s now an angry woke culture that’s also quick to persecute, to tear down jobs and reputations over the mildest misstep, to turn grievance into payback and to squash all chance of a robust but generous conversation that might lead somewhere. And of course we remember the purges and pogroms that both communist and fascist states insisted upon, so that in East Germany for instance there were almost as many STASI informers as citizens to inform on.

The problem, friends, is disappointment, anxiety, fear and unbelief. In today’s parable Jesus recognizes the challenges his followers face in a world with evil people in it, described as weeds sown among the wheat. Remember that Christians suffered persecution in the Roman Empire, and expulsion from the synagogue, with oppression of Christians continuing in various places to this day. Here we see part of the so-called problem of evil that philosophers and theologians constantly chew over—indeed, every one of us will likely have heard the frustrated question: ‘how can God let this happen?’; ‘how can God let them get away with it’? Perhaps we’ve asked this question ourselves: when we’ve been bullied, or scammed, or physically assaulted, or callously cast aside from a job or a family or a marriage.

Even within the Church you find this problem. St Augustine set it out early on, recognizing overlap between what he called the *Civitas Dei* and the *Civitas Terrena*, the City of God and the Earthly City, distinguishing also between the visible and the invisible Church. As a bishop, Augustine faced the problem of bad seed in the Church, and certainly in the wider fifth-century world, though he never insisted on righteous purges. He wasn't against law and order, but his preferred way forward for Christians in an imperfect world and an imperfect Church wasn't that of the punishers, the obsessive purifiers, the self-righteous. He saw that this treatment was worse than the disease. Pulling up weeds is a risky business, as Jesus tells us in today's parable, because it's likely to damage the wheat. Indeed, we might be too hasty in distinguishing the weeds from the wheat. God, however, plays the long game. And in the meantime God is more judicious, more patient, more attentive to people's inmost hearts, more aware that people can change for the better, and to that end more forgiving. And God frees us to be like that too.

Friends, the solution for us Christians in the face of weeds growing among the wheat isn't giving in to anxiety, it isn't grabbing the Roundup and thinking we'll fix the problem ourselves. But neither are we Christians required to pretend that there's no problem, that all the wrongs and hurts are just in our imaginations. No, real

forgiveness can only begin with a frank acknowledgement of what's in the wrong.

And then there's the confidence we'll need, which we see set out in our other readings this morning. Isaiah reminds us that we're witnesses to God's faithfulness, and that God needn't fear any competition from the dark forces in our world, so we can take heart. In this morning's portion of Psalm 86 the writer prays confidently in the face of all such assaults from the insolent, ruthless and hateful. Why? Because God has proved loving and faithful in the past, delivering this Psalmist from the greatest extremity of danger—from the lowest depths of the grave.

Then, from the magnificent chapter 8 of Romans, St Paul both frankly admits the problem and sets us on the right path for facing it. In words that remind us of today's gospel, Paul declares that the whole creation groans as if in labour pains, waiting for the problem of evil to be resolved—waiting for God's judgement to reveal the children of God, and to set creation free from its bondage to decay. Waiting for this we too groan inwardly, as Paul puts it. But this groaning is the Spirit's work within, so we needn't feel that we're just whinging and moaning unreasonably. Paul knows this is serious; evil people are a reality, but they won't ultimately defeat the children of God's

kingdom. Remember the wonderful last verse of Martin Luther's hymn, 'A Mighty Fortress is our God':

And though they take our life,  
Goods, honour, child and wife,  
Though we must let all go,  
They will not profit so.

To us remains the Kingdom.

Paul's message in Romans today is that a weight of glory overbalances the human evils we face: personally, yes; as a civilization, but also as Christians and Churches. And that weight of glory is something we're invited to experience in anticipation. Think of the Eucharist we celebrate as a decisive sign of that glory which is to come, standing out in all the words and ceremonies and music of our liturgy—lift up your hearts indeed.

So, friends, in light of this good news we can face the problem of evil, and especially in its human form, as Jesus invites us to do in this parable. Not for us the anxious, peevish, narrow, punishing way of the avenger, obsessed with purity, pulling up the weeds with a fierce righteousness. Instead, let's show our strength and confidence in patience, in self-restraint, and in not letting grievance get the better of us.

The Lord be with you ...