

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost 2020

1 Kings 3:5-12, Romans 8:26-39, Matthew 13:44-58

Last week our erudite preacher began with Nietzsche, so today let's begin with Dawkins! 'The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.' We might be tempted to think this about the universe we observe from time to time. But good and evil are most certainly real and they are the very reason why we are mindful of indifference. George Herbert the great metaphysical poet of the 1600s wrote a poem called 'The Pearl.' The first three stanzas concerns the observable, they begin: I know the ways of learning, I know the ways honour, I know the ways of pleasure. Each of these stanza ends 'yet I love thee.' But the last stanza ends with his search for something more, something beyond that which is observable. 'But thy silk twist let down from heav'n to me, Did both conduct and teach me how by it, To climb to thee.'

The parables of Jesus largely speak of the world we observe. As Canon Scott reminded us last Sunday – a world of good *and* evil, an issue that vexes philosophers and theologians, among others! It is given an airing in the account of Solomon's dream when God asks him what he most desires: 'Give your servant therefore an understanding mind...able to discern between good and evil.' Whilst the term the 'Wisdom of Solomon' has found its way into our vernacular, Jesus urges caution in emulating the great man. 'Look at the Lilies, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.' And speaking of himself Jesus reminds his followers 'something greater than Solomon is here.' What is that 'greater' thing? Today Matthew's Jesus has us consider the idea of something greater, a new wisdom, a new discernment.

This new wisdom suggests that we who call ourselves Christians are unable to identify wheat from weeds, good fish from bad, and this creates for us a crisis. Jesus knew his coming would bring division 'do you think I have come to bring peace?' He knew his coming would bring with it a crisis. In the coming of Jesus a new world has begun; another world, yes, but it is the same one as this world. A new world created within the old, and this is why there is a crisis. We are living, between two worlds, which calls for a new wisdom, a new discernment.

St Paul in this extraordinary passage from Romans seems to understand this: 'the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.' How often have we groaned at the evil in our world and our impotence in the face of it? But astonishingly Paul concludes 'We are more than conquerors' and even more astonishingly he says this in the teeth of hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and sword! This crisis is writ large here. Paul also tells us that this new world 'is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.' Paul and Jesus agree: 'this new world does not come with observation' - 'for indeed, it is within you.'

So the crisis deepens. Not only are we told that there are two worlds, but that they actually conflict within our very selves. There is a world that we can see, and a world we can sense. Our call is an apocalyptic one, to seek this world that

we can sense, find it latent in the one we can see and to live it, reveal it. This is never going to be easy, but this was never part of the deal! Take up your cross, the symbol of our crisis. Even Church itself has not dealt with it. Our divisions are as much about how we fail to live in this crisis as anything else and the result can be a sort of indifference and as the politician and philosopher Edmund Burke famously said: 'Nothing is so fatal to religion as indifference.'

At the turn of the century the US President invited notable speakers to the White House. Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace prize winner Elie Wiesel gave a speech titled 'The Perils of Indifference.' Wiesel warned of the lure of indifference and explained that the temptation of inaction and apathy allows us to focus solely on our own desires and goals. Earlier on, in 1996 in the same vein he said this: 'The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.'

Among the signs of this new world breaking in on the everyday, are the miracles of Jesus, (another subject of great debate), but importantly in today's gospel we are told that the in-breaking of this new world was impeded because of unbelief. Jesus comes home and his familiarity prevents him from revealing to those closest to him the new world he has been called to bring. The people of his home town are indifferent to him. The parables depict ordinary everyday scenes in the lives of 1st century Palestinian farmers, fishermen and merchants, this is problematic, this is familiar and people are indifferent. It's our problem too. We are called to see this new world in the everyday in the familiar, we are called to be God's parable in the world, everyday folk living among good and evil, yes; but caught up in this Kingdom of God. It makes for a crisis that can discourage us too and make us indifferent.

Many consider faith to be answer to a problem. If so, faith becomes an ideology, a form of activism or simply another constitution, and the problem of good and evil, 'for and against', 'us and them,' bubbles to the surface. And when faith doesn't answer our 'problem' we tend to indifference and we stymie this new world. But the Christian faith is not a moral code, it is not about discerning good from evil, not primarily. Faith is a journey, a searching, it is about discerning a new world breaking into our everyday, breaking into a world in which good and evil are a reality. We who live between these worlds, disciples of the kingdom are not indifferent to good and evil, quite the opposite but we are expectant in the sense that we take it for granted that there is always something about to be revealed, something about to burst into the ordinary and uncover a new light on the familiar, a way that does not underestimate the reality of evil, but sees beyond it to a new world, a pearl of great value which Jesus encourages us to search for, George Herbert's climb to, and to prize above everything.

This pearl exists within each of us. We search for it by contemplation, which far from being just one kind of thing that we Christians do: is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, life, (for Wiesel the antithesis of indifference); it is the key to the miracle of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and *all people* with a new vision, we will never completely find this pearl this side of eternity but may our indifference never stymie this miracle, this in-breaking of the kingdom of God into our everyday, into our hearts. Amen.