

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost 2023

When the gospel is read in Church there is a very real sense that we are hearing the words of Jesus; this is why in our tradition, we stand to welcome these words. The book of the Gospels is treated with reverence, it is brought from the altar, a sacred place, the focus of our worship. The gospel is not simply read - we read the lessons, but we 'proclaim' the gospel, often in the midst of the congregation. When we hear the gospel proclaimed, we are disciples at Jesus feet.

But there is also a sense in which we are also hearing the words as they were first heard and interpreted by Matthew's community, this new, mixed community of all manner of folk both Jews and Gentiles. And of course, we hear these words in today's context, in this time and place in 21st century, Canberra. The gospel proclaimed resonates through the millennia.

The English Puritan Richard Baxter considered dancing to be 'a sinful sport,' I won't tell you what John Calvin called it, I'll spare your blushes. Most of us today do not think of dancing in this way. Indeed, there are many things that we take for granted that would have been considered improper, inappropriate, or taboo not all that long ago. This small example, there are many others that no doubt you can think of, should caution us to be careful in our interpretation of these ancient texts. They are far too valuable, far too important, far too sacred for us not to treat them with great care and respect for their antiquity and interpret them accordingly.

When we read Matthew's gospel particularly, there are often times when I feel we are eavesdropping on the evangelist relating to this new community that is beginning to form, what Matthew calls 'the Ecclesia.' This a Greek word, it appears in words like ecclesiology or ecclesiastical. We simply translate it as Church – with a capital C. It is important for us to understand how radical this new community was. No doubt there would have been some in the community who would have wanted some form of purity: I'll leave you to imagine what form that might have taken; it's not difficult, because the Church in all its forms throughout the centuries has in different ways sought a kind of purity whether in practice, theology, ethics, music, liturgy, dress, etc. etc. etc., and in doing so it has often fallen short of Matthew's ideal of ecclesia. What bound this community together was not an agreed code of ethics or practices, it was not a community based on culture or ethnicity – but the love of Christ. And clearly the parable we heard this morning – the wheat and the weeds, which only appears in Matthew's gospel was one which he wanted this new community to hear.

So, the main point of the parable is, that unlike the disciples' expectation, and the expectations perhaps of some in Matthew's ecclesia and our expectations today the community wouldn't be a restored Israel – it would not be the Church of the 1950's. It would be a kingdom without borders where the citizens might not immediately appear

much different than those in the wider world around them. And any attempt to separate the two could do damage to God's kingdom, damage the ecclesia, ruin the Church. What is important to recognise is that this morning we are not thinking about weeding the garden, these tares are indistinguishable from the wheat - this is what Matthew's community ideally looked like.

In years past the term ecclesia has been used to describe those who have been 'called out' of the world, I vividly recall being told that I was wrong when I suggested this is the meaning of the word. Today, after an etymological rethink the word means 'being gathered,' 'being called in' rather than being 'called out!' So, when Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like...Matthew in turn says, that the ecclesia is the Kingdom of God and we proclaim that the church here and now anticipates that kingdom. It is a community filled with different ethnicities, nations, languages, sexes, levels of piety, levels of education, etc. All people were called in, gathered to live equally in this ecclesia, this kingdom, this Church.

Now there are times when I think that the wider community looks much more like Matthew's idea of ecclesia than some of our modern faith communities. I know only too well that many folks are disappointed in the Church in our time. We all have an idea of who we think the weeds are! For some the weeds are those who refuse to change with the times, for others they are those who demand change. We must live together in this mixed economy – this mixed ecclesia. This is what Paul is telling us this morning, this suffering, this tension between what is and what shall be is not worth comparing with God's glory, yes of course we groan, but we should, we must, be patient. There is a short sentence in this morning's epistle, easily overlooked: 'For in hope we were saved.'

Our gospel reading this morning is indeed two passages. Matthew seems to like to do this. He relates a parable, as he did last week, then gives us some context from the Old Testament then explains the parable in apocalyptic terms. It is the Jewish apocalyptic ideas shared by Jesus and the Gospel writers that we, in our time, find most difficult to understand. But what these writings did for those early Christian communities they do also for us. They help us retain and sustain hope in God's ultimate rescue while also providing a reason for present problems.

The present problems? Well, they are largely the same as they always have been. They are our easy acceptance of division on naming wheat and weeds. But they are us, the kingdom, the ecclesia, the Church... we who hope in God's love and justice and they are the world too, the world which also yearns for love and Justice. Our call is to reveal that love and justice are ultimately of God, and that we strive for them and hope and wait for them for the benefit of all with forbearance and patience.

For in this hope we were saved. Amen.