

SERMON, DA 190720 – ROMS 8.12-25, MATT 13

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well.

I am not going to suggest that at the beginning of this year Allestree and Darley Abbey were the kingdom of heaven, but we are very fortunate people. Good seed in our fields. We catch many glimpses of God's kingdom, we have wonderful friends, last year we celebrated a wonderful bicentenary of this church. We started this year feeling remarkably positive. Even on Ash Wednesday we commenced our Lenten journey looking forward to Easter – we know Lent is a time to look in on ourselves, a time for prayer and reflection, but we always start Lent knowing that Easter isn't far away. The place will be full of flowers, the Candle will be lit, we will sing and shout Alleluia!

And suddenly, it stopped. A week or two of realisation that this was not normal, a few very stressful days. At one point I was so stressed I phoned the bishop's office for advice, and ended up talking to Bishop Libby herself. She calmed me down, told me she was behind me and I could tell the cross family to phone her, and did everything I needed to make me know I was supported. Indeed, all through this I am very grateful to her, and to Archdeacon Chris and to Simon our Area Dean for their support – I am not always as polite and grateful to the diocese as I ought to be, so can I put it on record today that I think they have been very good, and we are fortunate. A glimpse of the kingdom of God in the people I work with.

We realised that among that good seed, someone sowed weeds among the wheat – the world changed. I am not going to suggest there was an evil mastermind who sowed the virus – that's a bit too James Bond – but somehow something evil was unleashed. We must be very careful at pointing the finger, blaming a city, a province, a country – it is much easier to have “an enemy” when actually, the way humans relate to their environment, the way we care for the world, the sort of world we have built, all these may well have contributed to where we are now. Evil is at work – and, yes, some people have benefitted from the crisis, there are a small group of people in our country who have been made wealthier by Covid, even wealthier than they were before. Evil is at work – some employers have treated their workers appallingly. Evil is at work – some people have taken out their anger in violence against foreigners, people who look

Chinese. Evil is at work – scammers, criminals take advantage of the chaos. Weeds, evil, suffering, disease, dis-ease, death – all of these are things that have no place in the Kingdom of God.

I have no doubt that the weeds will continue to grow and do their damage. There was a crisis in care before all this, and it's worse than it was. Our NHS was under strain before all this, and it's worse than it was. There was a crisis in mental health, in the mental health of our young people – and that's only been magnified. To say nothing of the economy – despite the slogans, I am struggling to believe things will be OK.

Lord, let's go and gather the weeds, let's rip them out, burn the lot of them, cleanse the world – we need the Kingdom NOW.

And Jesus says “no”, we are where we are, and the weeds grow in with the wheat. And, in an amazing way, dealing with the weeds helps produce good seed. Talking to the administrator of one of our residential homes yesterday, she commented what an amazing strong team of staff they are now. How they have shown incredible love and care in the face of death. The challenge is, how do we make others realise the importance and value of carers, whatever nationality they happen to be. Following many medics on social media, I have seen incredible pictures, heard amazing stories – so that challenges us as to how we fund our NHS, value our nurses, they need more than a clap. I could go on and on, and no doubt you could too – we all know that we have caught glimpses of the Kingdom of God even in the darkest hours of covid.

The trouble is, we all find life a struggle, and we're not good at celebrating the Kingdom of God. You parents, who have coped with your children, coped with your jobs, coped with each other – I am in awe of you, you have built the Kingdom of God. You workers, who have struggled to keep your business going despite all the contradictory advice and instructions - I am in awe of you, you have built the Kingdom of God. You retired people, who have cared for each other, made phone calls, helped with supplies, been there for your children and grandchildren, loved and supported and listened - I am in awe of you, you have built the Kingdom of God. We need to hear the stories of the Kingdom.

And in the Kingdom, we will live with the weeds. When the weeds of job losses surround our kids, our friends, our neighbours, we will be there. Sometimes just listening, sometimes giving practical support. When the weed of hunger flourishes, of being unable to feed the family on small wages or benefits, we will be there supporting our foodbank. When it's the weed of loneliness, or fear, or sickness, or death – we will be there.

We are here to fight those weeds, and we are here to help the wheat grow. To say to this world, there is a better way, a more positive way, God's way. We proclaim that God made a beautiful world, a world to be celebrated, enjoyed, and loved. That's a challenge – if we love this world, we must care for it. The environmental crisis hasn't gone away. We caught a glimpse of a better world, a world with less traffic, with better air quality, where nature was starting to recover. Whether it's in the way we live our lives, the way we manage our churchyard, the value we put on things – God's speaks to us, his creation is "very good". That's a continuing fight.

We recognise the power of evil, and we fight it. We shout for justice, we stand against corruption, we realise the fear that leads people into evil. We acknowledge that human beings are sinners, nobody, ever, is sinless. We bring good news and forgiveness for all.

Because we believe, we know, that Jesus is sinless. He is the Son of God who came to this earth. He gave us a vision, he taught us, he died for us, he rose again, and he calls us into a personal relationship with him. That relationship, that forgiveness, means we worship – whether we worship in a building or by the power of a laptop – we worship. We come into his presence, into the presence of God, and worship, prayer and praise, his love and the relationship we have with him, that is what gives us the strength to work for the transformation of his world.

Normally we come together to the altar to take communion – and there is something so symbolic in that. Our walk to the altar, our kneeling before God, the words "the body of Christ, the blood of Christ", that means a lot. There is symbolism as we individually take the wafer, as we drink together from the cup. There is a symbolism as we go back to our seats, having taken Christ within us, we go out.

Today it is different. I will come to you. Because I will be getting close to you, I will put my mask on. I don't want to be dressed as a highwayman or a bank robber – I have decided I will be the masked crusader, that has a better ring to it. I will simply put the wafer into your hands, and I am supposed to make sure I don't touch your hand. When I quietly say "The body of Christ" you may not hear me as I talk into my mask. No one can offer you wine, and that feels wrong. Then I move on, and you remain seated. We don't want conversation, we don't want interruption, but not all of us will be able to find the words (or the silence) to pray. We want normality, and communion this way is not normal.

30 years ago, when I was a very young Baptist Lay Pastor, I was asked to take communion to a lady who had multiple sclerosis. She hadn't been able to come

to church for a few years, and home communion had rather fallen by the wayside when the church didn't have a pastor. I had had very little experience of taking communion outside church, and I was still young enough to be slightly embarrassed when I arrived for the first time to find she was having a bad day and couldn't get out of bed. Together we worked out the logistics of where to sit, whether she could manage to hold a wafer (just about), whether she could hold a chalice (no way) – how we actually managed to do communion. The first time, I'm not sure how deep a spiritual experience it was, but as I visited regularly we got into a good place, and that relationship – based on our shared communion – was very special for several years. We met Christ in our communion, and we were blessed – there's a lesson for us all in that story.

Christ is with us, in the normal, the new normal, and the total utter chaos. God is our father, abba father, and nothing can separate us from his love.