

Reflection from the Revd Ali Massey for Trinity 6

One of the great privileges of being a vicar is to talk to lots of different people in different situations. Under normal circumstances, at this time of year, I would offer the local primary school a year 6 retreat. A time for the year 6 pupils to reflect on their transition between primary and senior school. The day is planned to allow time to reflect on the 7 years spent at primary school, and to think about what challenges and opportunities senior school will bring. Part of the day is designed to offer the space to ask 'the big questions' – those things that are niggling away at us, but we don't have the opportunity or the vocabulary to ask. One question that is usually asked, is the one that most people have at some point in their lives asked, why does God allow suffering?

I am sure that given recent events, the Coronavirus pandemic and the terror attack in Reading, it is a question that has been on many people's minds. I am afraid that I don't have an easy answer. But I don't believe that God has sent Coronavirus into the world to test us or to punish us. I also don't think that God is sitting on a cloud controlling all that we do. God has given us life and God has also given us freedom of choice. Sometimes people choose to do the wrong thing, and occasionally people choose to do evil things. That freedom of choice is part of the gift of being human. We have the freedom of choice to decide if we are going to live in a way that honours God and honours other people, or to choose to live our lives only for ourselves.

We know that there are many horrible things in the world like poverty, exploitation, diseases like Coronavirus, cancer and dementia. And our question may be, why does God allow this? Exploitation is usually a result of individual greed. Poverty can be a result of exploitation of countries, people or resources. Disease may be a response to the way we treat the environment, the way we use the natural God-given gifts of creation and intellect. But however they are caused, I am sure that God doesn't just sit by and allow these things to cause us suffering. Sometimes things just are.

What I *do* believe is that God is present with us through everything and suffering alongside us. We are all God's beloved children. Paul reminds us in the epistle that we call God 'Abba', colloquially dad or daddy. That word epitomising the close, loving relationship that God wants to have with us all. Anyone who has ever loved anyone else understands that they would do anything to take away their beloved's pain. To put themselves in their beloved's place of suffering if that were possible. So how much more does God want to take away our pain, our suffering and to ease our distress. When illness hits us or a loved one, when we have disasters in our lives, God is with us, beside us, holding us in our pain and distress. Weeping when we weep. But ultimately giving us the strength to go on.

Today's Gospel passage comes in the middle of a chapter in Matthew's Gospel that is full of Jesus' parables. Jesus understood that most of us can relate to deep spiritual truths if they are in a context we are familiar with. So, Jesus uses ordinary things and situations that people would come across and understand. Jesus uses stories, in this case weeds growing alongside wheat, in order to attract their attention and to convey, in an understandable way, some of the truth about the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus uses parables to point us towards God, to paint a picture for us of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. In this parable, Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field and then when his workers were asleep the man's enemy came and planted weeds amongst the seed.

I'm sure that most of us can identify with that analogy. No matter how much weeding we do in the garden, it seems that as soon as we turn our backs the weeds sprout up again. And sometimes it can feel a bit like that in the world we live in. No matter how much good is done, and there such a lot of good within the world, as soon as we turn on the tv or open a newspaper, what we see is the evil raising its ugly head again.

In our parable, the man is prepared to wait, to put up with the ugliness of the weeds to preserve the wheat and then at the right time he will act, separating out the wheat from the weeds. Jesus reminding the people that they are God's creation. God has planted the seed but the weeds have grown up amongst them. In Jesus' time there was a specific weed called darnel that was poisonous. If it was planted with the wheat, it would grow amongst the wheat and destroy it. So perhaps the parable is also a warning to the people of God, and to us, that there is always someone or something with the capability to destroy our lives. We all need to guard our physical and spiritual existence.

In the second part of the reading Jesus explains the parable to the disciples. He tells them that the good seeds are the children of the Kingdom and the weeds are the children of the evil one. This is a choice that we all have - a choice between good and evil, a choice to be in relationship with our heavenly Father or to turn away and reject him. The parable also reminds us that our choices have consequences. That one day we will face judgement. But Jesus also reminds us that God, the judge of all the universe, is a just God who through the person of Jesus knows exactly what it is like to be human. God understands our weaknesses, our fallibility and loves us anyway.

Sometimes, when we listen to the news, when we hear of more outbreaks of Coronavirus, or other disasters happening around the globe, we can feel helpless and wonder just what the world is coming to. As Christians we are called to look beyond the headlines and look for the signs of hope and encouragement, to see the wheat amongst the weeds. To rejoice in them, thank God for them and share them with others.

Our Gospel reading is ultimately one of hope – the hope and the promise of eternal life available to all of us through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. There will come a time when the weeds will be sorted when 'the Son of man will send his angels and they will collect out of the kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers' and when 'the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father'. Until that time, the way to life, the way of hope, the way to the Father is open to each and every one of us through God's Son Jesus Christ.

We all have a choice. But the great news is that it is never too late to choose to follow Jesus and to enter into a relationship with our heavenly Father. When we choose life, living for God and for others, we can trust Jesus' promise that we will all be gathered up in the harvest with the good seeds, and that we too will shine like the Sun in God's heavenly kingdom.

Whoever has ears, let them hear.

Amen