



Revd Ro's Reflection on Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Proper 11

Year A

Romans 8.12-25

Matthew 13.24-30,36-43

I have to be honest I didn't always make connections between the gospel and the other New Testament reading until I started writing these reflections. Certainly as we hear them read week by week it's often hard to recognise a connection but when we make time to think about them and study them the link becomes clear. We have seen this with the readings of late and the same is true for the readings for Proper 11. The link is that they are eschatological, that is they both deal, in part anyway, with the 'end time' the last days.

I remember when I was doing my 'A' levels and we were reading John Donne's Holy Sonnet VII. It begins with the line,

'At the round earth's imagin'd corners blow angels.'

It was of course about the end time. I remember the teacher saying, 'Now if the end of the world came tonight what would happen?' It was, of course, a daft question because nobody knows. The truth is only God knows and Jesus uses figurative language and parables when he does address the topic. In fact it was wrong anyway because there is no 'end of the world' but the beginning of God's newly created order.

Let's begin with St. Paul's letter to the Romans which continues from last week. I have said previously that Paul's arguments are reasoned and follow on logically. The conclusion last week was that those who set their minds on evil and sin will not turn to Jesus or accept his message but those who do and live the Christian life will share in his resurrection.

'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.'

This is the point; notice the words, Spirit and spirit and the use of the capital letter. The Holy Spirit of God dwells within each one of us, think of the words 'You are a temple of the Holy Spirit.' Our spirit

must conform to the Holy Spirit and all that we are must become a 'living temple to the Lord.' Another way of saying this is that Christians' thoughts and actions must be governed by the teachings of Jesus Christ. Our selfish desires need to be discarded and we need to be in tune with Jesus.

We can understand now why the first words in verse twelve are, 'Thus then,' or it follows that. Paul makes the point that we are no longer in debt to the flesh, it doesn't control us. As I said before, instead of 'flesh' we could substitute sin and for 'Spirit,' that which is of God, indeed, after Pentecost, the Spirit of God dwelling within us, a point Paul often makes. We cannot be held in bondage if we live according to Jesus' teaching, according to God's word.

¹² 'So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—
¹³ for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.'

We are servants of Jesus not of sin. The reward is ours. God, by free grace, has given us salvation, and eternal life. Jesus won that for us at Calvary and by his resurrection. We know, as Paul did, that sin has not gone away, not then and not now and is always ready to lure people back, 'in thought and deed and word.' No one is without sin, only Jesus, the incarnate God. But his life is our pattern; his way is ours to follow just as best as we fallible humans can.

¹⁴ 'For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—'

What wonderful verses; those who truly turn to Christ are inheritors not strangers. We are God's beloved children. We must not throw away all that Christ has won for us by slipping into sin but instead walk in God's way and be adopted by him. If we are adopted by him we can, like Jesus, really call God Father and Paul uses the Aramaic word 'Abba'. Jesus uses it when he teaches his disciples to pray, 'Our Father.' 'Abba' is the familiar form, like 'daddy'. It is full of closeness and love. This is the kind of relationship we can have with God our creator. Thus we are heirs. The promise is amazing, the promise of God, for the Messiah to rule over all creation, is ours too if we are truly his followers. But that promise carries huge responsibilities.

Paul follows this with, 'if in fact we suffer with him so that we might be glorified with him.' That is what so many of the early followers of Jesus could expect, persecution was very real. This leads on to Paul's next point v18 where he says, what we suffer here is 'not worth comparing with the glory that is to come.' This must have inspired those who were going through difficult times or even facing death due to their belief in Jesus. Death is not the end, eternal life is with Christ.

It is at this point that Paul's writing becomes eschatological. He turns his attention to the end time. What he is talking about is not just personal salvation, it is about the redemption and recreation of the entire creation, so that the creation will be set free from evil, corruption and decay. There is a whole theology about this and no space to discuss it in a short reflection. However, if we think of passages like,

'The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.' Isaiah 11. 6

That's it in a nutshell. It's not pie in the sky stuff, it's hugely profound and symbolic. It means that all redeemed creation will be in harmony, as God intended it to be. It is his creation perfected. But that is not instantaneous, it takes time, it is a process. Paul talks of both creation and the children of God waiting with eager longing, The first fruits Jesus won for humanity, it is up to us to act according to his word so his kingdom can finally come,

'Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.'

We are still waiting in hope, but must also live actively as children of hope so that God can work through us that transformation of his world. Paul shows us God's plan of salvation for the whole of creation and humanity, the glorious rule of Jesus over the whole world. But,

²² 'we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now, ²³and not only the creation but we ourselves. Who have the first fruits of the Spirit.'

It's a brilliant metaphor and John 16.21 echoes it

²¹ 'When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world.'

The world is still in a mess as it was then; sin is still rife, wars, disasters and plagues as we know all too well, still happen. These are like the labour pains. We have to have faith in that ultimate promise of God that all creation will be redeemed. Just as in the metaphor that after the pain finally a child will come into the world, God's kingdom will come and his glory will be revealed. God gave humans free will, he is no puppet master. Humanity of its own free will must live according to God's way not the way of sin.

If we think back to Genesis, 'In the beginning,' when the 'Spirit moved over the waters' human beings were put in charge, as in given responsibility for his world, as the hymn says, 'We but stewards of thy bounty held in solemn trust for thee.' To be frank a right mess humans made of it then and still are doing. It isn't just that creation is waiting to share in the freedom of God's children, but when God's heirs are glorified the creation will be transformed to what God always intended. We hold the responsibility of helping in the process of bringing God's kingdom in by our actions. It isn't a disembodied place; it is the bringing about of a new perfected created order on earth, an earth and people in harmony and ruled over by Jesus, brought about by God and assisted by the good actions of his followers. It is a time when sin will be vanquished and of course of God's final judgement.

Part of a Christian's job is to help in this process but we are called to share in the world's pain and to try to do something about it. This was symbolised as two bishops knelt in Wells Cathedral in solidarity with 'Black lives matter.' The wonderful fact of God's love for humanity is that all lives matter to him so much that he died for us.

We know that the present reality is very different from Paul's overview of God's final promise but the Spirit of God is within us. It's up to us to do our own small part to facilitate the bringing in of God's kingdom when, 'Justice shall roll down like the waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream.' Amos 5. 24

That leads us on to the gospel reading and it is helpful to read it in the light of what Paul has written. Jesus makes it quite clear that the kingdom of God will come but that evil is rife and not everyone will choose God's way. Justice means judgement and judgement for everyone. So then, what of those who persist in doing wrong, who wantonly oppress and kill and destroy God's world? There

must be that judgement and destruction of sin. Jesus is talking of the last days, the final judgement of the world. Only when sin is finally destroyed can God's creation be perfected and the new creation established.

This last judgement is not often a focus in our church services but one time that we do think of it is Advent. During the period of Advent we prepare for the coming of our king Jesus at Christmas but also the coming of Jesus as King at the last to rule and judge the world. This was the Messianic promise. The hymn, 'Lo he comes with clouds descending,' sung in Advent is all about that. The liturgical colour is purple; it is worn also in Lent. It is a time to repent, a time to take stock of our lives and to root out anything from our lives that is not as Jesus would have it.

Jesus talks of these truths once again using a parable. Going back to the question my English teacher asked, how can you understand the 'end time?' Well Jesus uses a parable. The parable of the weeds follows directly from the sower, it is again dear to my heart as a gardener and allotment holder. It is about forgiveness in part. Nobody has ever sown weeds in my plot but someone once cut my raspberries down because they overhung his path! They were beautiful and ripening and the bees were having a field day. I felt anger at such wanton destruction. I was surprised by that anger and I felt really guilty too. I did not show the forbearance of the landowner in the passage.

'...The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" ²⁸ He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" ²⁹ But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn." '

The parable of the weeds and wheat, just like the Romans reading, is about waiting. The trouble with a lot of people is they want things instantaneously and often choose violence to obtain them. The disciples show self-righteous anger when Jesus is making his final way to Jerusalem. He wants to stay at a Samaritan village but they won't have him and James and John cry, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" (Luke 9. 54.) Needless to say Jesus doesn't. They have forgotten all about forgiveness, Jesus' central teaching. The temptation is to say we are good, they are bad, or we are wheat, they are weeds.

Carol Klein has a favourite saying, 'There is no such thing as a weed, just a plant in the wrong place.' Well maybe Jesus is saying that there is no such thing as weeds, just plants who have turned their back on God and have chosen to do wrong. The weeds of the parable are people made in the image of God but who have chosen evil. That is the point I made earlier, God gives us free will. They could, if they chose, turn back to him and receive love and forgiveness.

The parable is in part, about forgiveness. Jesus says that the weeds are not rooted out, they are left to grow. There is time to change, there is time to repent and that brings forgiveness. Jesus said to the thief on the cross, 'Today you will be with me in paradise.' That was right at the end of that man's life of sin. Ours is a God who loves us and wants us to be his children living in his way. The parable is spoken to the crowds; once again the explanation is given to the disciples. 'The one who sows the good seed is the son of man.' Jesus came to bring the word of God but if people choose evil instead of good, choose wrong instead of right, then at the harvest judgement will

come. Jesus gives graphic images which have led to whole doctrines and beliefs. The mediaeval view of hell fire and damnation has persisted. But we know that God does not sit gleefully watching devils with pitchforks pushing people whom he loves and created in his image into a gaping hell mouth. With the God who is love that is impossible. That does not mean that those who turn their back on him and choose evil will not be condemned. It is only when evil is finally completely eradicated that his new creation will be perfected. How that will be accomplished we simply cannot know.

But Jesus is quite clear, as indeed St. Paul is; don't ever be tempted to think, they are weeds and we are wheat. We will all be judged. Our commission is to stand up for what is right, to love, forgive and live as children of God and to get rid of any behaviour that is wrong or not in accord with his teachings. That is why he says 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen.'

God knows our innermost thoughts and sees our actions. Judgement will come on this earth, his kingdom will be established. We must live as Jesus taught us and care for his people and creation.

'Let us open our eyes to the light that comes from God and our ears to the voice from heaven which calls us.' Rule of St. Benedict.

~~~~~