

Sermon on the BCP readings for Epiphany 5, Matthew 13:24

The Dean reflects on the parable of the wheat and the tares as Jesus warns his followers against premature judgements.

I wonder if you are old enough to have played cowboys and Indians as a child? We certainly played in our house, complete with dressing up and cap guns to fire at one another from behind the furniture. From our Sunday afternoon television viewing, we were very familiar with the 1950's cowboy movies where the good guys in the white hats did battle with the outlaws in the black hats.

In that black and white world, it was very clear who were the goodies and who were the baddies.

The world of social media today is not very different. It tells simple stories about heroes and villains, saints and sinners, victims and abusers. But Jesus warns us against this way of thinking in the parable he tells today. Yes, there is evil in the world, but we can't always be sure where it is to be found. Only on the day of judgement will there be clarity, when Jesus himself judges what has been fruitful.

Perhaps we can consider this point from two perspectives?

The first is to ask how we imagine our encounter with God on the day of judgement?

What do you expect when you come face to face with the one who knows you better than you know yourself?

The God from whom no secrets are hidden and from whom all our desires are known? The God who knows the things we hardly dare to admit ourselves as well as the things that we can admit, but only with a deep sense of shame.

This is the moment to remember that God is in Christ and that all that we see in Christ is God. To remember that it was Christ who knelt in the dust beside the woman caught in adultery and assured her that she was forgiven, who looked into the eyes of Judas and told him to do what he needed to do, who met Peter on the shore after he had betrayed him and instructed him to feed his sheep.

At the end of time when all our lives are gathered together into the life of the Kingdom, the one who judges the fruits will be the innocent victim who forgave those who tortured and crucified him.

For each of thus, that is the hope and assurance that, despite our frailties and failings, we might be forgiven.

Knowing this, how are we to look at the frailties and failings of our sisters and brothers?

Are we going to judge them by asking, are you a goodie or a baddie, a hero or a villain, a saint or a sinner, a victim or an abuser?

Or can we find it in ourselves to look on them as we hope that Jesus looks on us?

Can we find the grace to suspend our judgement?

Contemporary psychology will tell us that this is extremely hard to do. There is a simple form of unconscious bias known as the “halo effect” that tells us that once we have formed a judgement about someone else, we will seek evidence to confirm our views and ignore that which seems to contradict them.

When the facts change, for example when a much-loved figure is revealed to have been a child abuser, or a fraudster, we find it really difficult to assimilate this new information. It is equally hard then, not to flip our judgement completely, and to resist any sense that the works, output or creations of that person are corrupted and worthless. You may well be familiar with some of these dilemmas in the assessment of the music of Wagner, a Nazi sympathiser, or the art of Eric Gill, who sexually abused his daughters, or the films of Roland Polanski, who had sex with underaged young women.

Nothing excuses the actions of these individuals. Antisemitism, incest and child abuse are wrong and impose suffering on victims whose trauma should never be brushed aside. None of this is to excuse sin, whatever form it takes. But, Jesus points us to a bigger picture. In the moral landscape that we all inhabit, things are rarely simple.

Jesus does not refrain from telling people that they have sinned. Sitting in the dust with the woman caught in adultery, he tells her to go away and sin no further. But in truth, he talks much more frequently about forgiveness.

And the key to his teaching is that we are forgiven, so that we should forgive others. Only when we do so can the cycle of violence and retribution, the sin that feeds on sin, be broken.

The world of black and white may feel a little extreme, though no doubt we all have our views, privately expressed, about particular political figures or church leaders in the world today.

But let me try a little thought experiment with you.

Consider the categories of people you instinctively like, the ones you would feel comfortable in a room with, the person you might chose to sit next to on a crowded bus or train, and then consider those who would avoid, the people who make you feel a little uncomfortable, the ones you would chose to sit far away from.

Isn't that just another kind of white hat / black hat thinking?

We make judgements every day and all the time.

Can I invite you to disrupt those judgements and to ask yourself "How does Jesus see this person?" "How can I be more like Jesus?"

Then take a risk, cross the room, open up a conversation on the bus, suspend your judgement, and pray that they might suspend theirs.

One thing we know about wheat and tares is that they look extremely similar. It is hard to tell the difference when they are growing together in the field. In this parable Jesus warns his followers not to judge prematurely, let's take that message to heart.