

**Diocesan sermon, June 19 2020**



**Bishop Paul**

***Readings***

***Romans 8:12-25***

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— 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. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For 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!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

***Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43***

He put before them another parable: “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. 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?’ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 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.’ ”

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Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing

of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!"

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### ***Sermon***

A few weeks ago I broke a tooth. It was a big molar that had done great work for me for well over fifty years, and I broke it by biting a potato crisp. I didn't bite hard, and there wasn't a stone in the crisp. According to the dentist, the edge of the crisp had simply impacted on a thin crack, a fault-line in the tooth, as any crisp could have done for decades. All the fault-line needed was a piece of food in the wrong place at the wrong time – and I now have a broken tooth, and of course no immediate prospect of a filling.

The Coronavirus has more in common with a mouthful of broken glass than with a Salt and Vinegar crinkle-cut. And it is impacting on all our personal and institutional lives at once. But the principle is the same; ways of being and living that have done us well for decades and centuries are suddenly under impact, and if there are fault-lines some of them will break, with no immediate prospect of a filling. We are being stress-tested as individuals and as a society. How should we live in such a time?

The New Testament was written at a time when this sort of stress-testing - illness, invasion, war, injustice - was a regular feature of individual and common life, as our epistle and gospel readings make clear. Each reading addresses the question: good and evil live side by side, so what are we to do?

The world is complicated. People can behave dreadfully towards one another, the structures of society can prefer and privilege some groups over others in ways that seem impossible to change; our own impulses to sin and selfishness, repeated through our lives, can appear impossible ever to change or to transform.

At the same time goodness flourishes everywhere, generosity and selflessness can be seen especially when things are in crisis, we continue to be shaped as a society living under law and defending the weak, and we can surprise ourselves by our own strength and courage in situations which no one else will ever see.

To think this through is to address the problem of evil in the world. As the Psalmist says, "Lord, why do the wicked prosper?" Or as Jesus says in John's Gospel, do you think the people killed in accidents - for example the Galileans killed when that tower fell on them in Siloam - were worse than other Galileans? And he answers, no.

The great physicist Albert Einstein once said, "You should try to make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler". This is a good rule for Christians who are immersed in the world that God made and that God loves. Here and there you see examples of Christians who try to make the world simpler than God has made it - for example by turning their backs on the world and establishing a parallel culture of pure people who have nothing to

do with what they see as the impure world. This seems to me to fall into the trap described by Jesus when he has the servants in the parable say "Let's uproot the weeds now, and have a pure field". No, says the master, that would not work, and you'd damage the good fruit too. There are plenty of examples of self-styled pure communities which go badly wrong and become oppressive, hurtful, and in the most extreme cases deadly.

The world is complicated. Good and evil live side by side. It is always like that. But in a world crisis, such as the pandemic we're living through at the moment, the stress-test is acute. Jesus' story of the field states the situation clearly; in the field of the world good and evil grow side by side, and seeking to uproot the evil and to establish a pure world will do more harm than good.

But this is not to say that Christians should not be distinctive. We are called to seek and to pursue holiness, even as we are called to be immersed in the world God loves. St Paul in that wonderful eighth chapter of Romans has resources that can help us here.

He speaks shrewdly and realistically of this complicated world, this world that mixes the good fruit with the fruit of enmity and evil. "We know", he says, "that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies".

The whole creation is in pain, and we, who have the Spirit of God, are in pain along with it. Our calling is not to escape into another field, but to bear with the field we're in; the world God loves; and to serve it. And according to St Paul the primary gift of God to us in this complicated world is hope. "For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

In this stressful and complicated age of Coronavirus we're called to live in hope. This is not at all the same thing as being called to live optimistically. Optimism - being upbeat, being cheerful, looking on the bright side - this has its place in life, though it seems for some of the leaders of the world as though it's all that matters. Optimism is sometimes, rightly, shipwrecked by truth - and if we stifle truth so as to remain optimistic, we have left the right path behind, and sleepwalked smiling into a world of lies.

But hope does not depend on what is seen, nor on turning a blind eye to what is seen if it doesn't agree with our fantasies. By the time we get to Romans 8, Paul has already said this, in Chapter 5: "we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us".

In the midst of suffering and stress our calling as those who have the spirit of Jesus is to bear with the complexity of the world, in hope.

In our Diocese of Liverpool we are asking God for a bigger church to make a bigger difference; more people knowing Jesus, more justice in the world. To share the good news of Jesus and to struggle for justice, to bear the complexity of the world in hope, is to become clear-eyed and light-hearted.

And so my prayer for the Diocese in these days of Coronavirus is for clear-sightedness and light-heartedness in each and all our disciples. May God in Christ give these gifts to you, personally, and to your community, and to all the 60,000 or so people who comprise the Diocesan family. And may God in Christ be close to you in your praying, and your serving, and your living, this week and into God's future. Amen.

Paul Bayes, July 2020