

19th July 2020 6pm The Wheat and the Weeds

Service led by Emma Latham, sermon by Robert Latham

Bible readings by Emma Latham and Felicity Hawke

This transcript is only of the readings and the talk

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First reading: Romans 8:12-25 [NIVUK]

¹² Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation – but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

¹⁴ For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. ¹⁵ The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’ ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

Second reading: Matthew 13:24-30,36-43 [NIVUK]

The parable of the weeds

²⁴ Jesus told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed ears, then the weeds also appeared.

²⁷ ‘The owner’s servants came to him and said, “Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?”

²⁸ “‘An enemy did this,” he replied.

‘The servants asked him, “Do you want us to go and pull them up?”

²⁹ “‘No,” he answered, “because while you are pulling up the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: first collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.”’

The parable of the weeds explained

³⁶ Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.'

³⁷ He answered, 'The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

⁴⁰ 'As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. ⁴² They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

Talk

[Robert Latham:]

Good evening everybody. Let's pray.

May I speak in the name of God who is Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I don't know how many of you were familiar with that that particular hymn [*Sing the Almighty Power of God*], but it has a particular significance for me. Having been brought up in the context of the Methodist Church, having started Sunday school at the age of two, and being introduced by my mother into adult worship from early tender age, the significance of that hymn is simply that it is the first hymn from the Methodist hymn book which I recall learning, that I have learned in Sunday school. My reflection of the times when we were taken to church was that I often sat silently through the hymns, because I didn't know them. But I think *The Almighty Power of God* was the first one I really remember picking up and learning to sing, and that's one reason why I've chosen it. It is a lovely hymn by Isaac Watts, which speaks of the creative hand of God. It's not just about beginnings, but the continuing process of God's Word - creation in the world today.

In our readings today, another song, rather than a hymn, came to mind. Now, the reading from Romans and that part which talks about creation, "all in bondage to decay and waiting for us human beings" reminds me of a song which was current, I guess, must have been in the 1970s, which talks about "And all creation stands on tiptoe just to see the sons of God come into their own." Well, the reason why I asked for us to sing that hymn just now is because I want us to go back to beginnings. I want us to kind of try and get a context of that Romans reading by going back to Genesis, because we don't get an understanding of what Paul is talking about unless we understand what the first calling of us human beings was in the world. When God made us human beings, Adam and Eve, if you'd like to put it that way, He made us with a designated role, and with work to do. If we read from Genesis 1 [NIVUK 1984], we'll find these words:

"Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So that's verse 26 of Genesis 1 and it's God declaring over this new creation that humanity that He has made will actually have this rôle and responsibility for Him. It is only being made as vice-regents of this created order, to care and to attend to and look after the world, on behalf of Father God. It's a rôle that will require a very careful, interpersonal relationship between us and God. It's one that we see mapped out in the first couple of chapters of Genesis, particularly chapter 2, where Adam and God work together. Just a little example of this is the way in which God brings all the creatures of the earth to Adam, and he looks through them and over them and names each one. And whatever each one is named by Adam, God says, "That's the name." And you get a picture here of God and Adam working together in perfect harmony, working together, and tending and caring for all that has been made. Of course we know that very shortly it gets spoiled. And a further indication of this relationship is when Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit, that the Lord God comes looking for them. And I'm sure He knew where they were. But Adam and Eve are hiding. And God notices that their relationship has been disrupted and broken. "Where are you? I want to see you! I want to have you with me!"

Well, talking about the forbidden fruit, Ravi Zacharias says¹ that it wasn't so much as the apple and the tree, as the pair on the ground, that was the problem. We've got a big dilemma for God here, haven't we, if you think about it. God has taken His time over us. He's produced us thinking, feeling human beings whom He has given charge to the world to look after, and He wants them to cooperate with Him in that process. But now they have broken the covenant. They've done the one thing that they were told not to do. Should God rescind His authority of Adam? Should He take back the responsibility that He's placed upon them, or should He do something else? God's not that sort of God, though, because the responsibility of caring for creation remains with us human beings. It remains with us to this present day. The only problem is, because we're trying to please ourselves and find our *own* way through this life, then, all of us by default. It's not God who's consulted about these things, but Satan who suddenly has a great power over these things, because we are following the things that He tells us to do. And that's the problem that Paul highlights when he talks about the created order in Romans 8. He sees that the created order is subject to decay, because we human beings, who are supposed to tend and care for it, have been found wanting on the job. And we're not actually doing the things that we are supposed to. And it's a dire set of circumstances, is it not?

But there is hope. In fact, going back to the beginning of Romans 8, we see how the way in which man is restored to God by the receipt of God's Spirit into our hearts and lives. God makes a new covenant, because the price of man's wrongdoing is paid for by Jesus. He dies upon the Cross for us, and rising and ascending to heaven, He sends to us the Holy Spirit. And we now can enter into that relationship and into that covenant, so that we can be restored in the rôle of tending and caring for creation. Paul is at pains to point out, there is no condemnation now, for those who are in Christ Jesus. And the Spirit of God now working in us enables us to be restored and return to the fold of God. In fact, you could say that we are 'justified'. Paul talks about this earlier on in the letter to Romans. He says how God has made it in this way, through the covenant, to enable us to be restored to Him, and it's just as though we have not sinned, and we then can resume the relationship with God, and use His authority again to tend and care for the created order. (Let me just consult with my notes, because I've done all of that without doing so.) Of course for us human beings, that doesn't mean that the magic wand has been unfurled and waved, and we suddenly can just attain perfection. There's a whole process which we have to enter into.

When I was in South Africa, some years ago, I encountered a gentleman called Bob Mumford. I never met him because I only saw him on video. But he talked about

1 ... when quoting from Norm Geisler (see <https://twitter.com/RaviZacharias/status/1152370388820725760>)

how we have to understand the work and the way of the Cross. The work of the Cross is to bring us into that relationship with God and restore the covenant, in which we are brought out of sin, we receive the Holy Spirit and start a new journey with Him. And the journey begins once we have received the Spirit and continue on. And that journey could also be construed as a process of sanctification, in which the Spirit works on us to shape us ready for Heaven, and to lead also for us able to do God's work. It's things that happen in us and through us. Bob Mumford tells of that moment when we receive the Spirit: he says, "How many of you know that when we receive the Spirit that we've not got to the goal, the attainment we're seeking for?" Of course we have not! We've only just begun. But that process by which we obtain the process of sanctification has continuing ramifications. Because that means that as we are being prepared and processed and sanctified, ready for the heavenly realms, then all creation is waiting for that process to be completed and processed, and made perfect, so that creation itself can be released from the bondage of decay. It really is, therefore, that we have to take note of how great our sin is in the sense that all creation is affected because of human sin, but also how God lovingly is seeking to tend and to bring everything back into the proper order.

So how, then, do we apply this to the reading from Matthew? It is a familiar reading. We're aware that Jesus tells a story in which a field is sown with good seed, but an enemy in the night comes and sows bad seed, so that both grow together. The bad seed clearly damages the crop - it is not going to be good news if you've got weeds in amongst all the things you're growing. Just lately Emma and I have been doing a lot of work in our garden, trying to bring up to date all the things that have been neglected in the past and it's been mighty hard work. But what is it supposed to mean for us? The workers in the wheat-field ask the owner if they should gather up the weeds, tear them up out of the field, and the owner wisely says that that should not be the case, because, in doing so, you'll tear up the weeds as well. What are we to do?

You know sometimes I'm quite glad that the disciples were thick. Why? Well, because they obviously don't get what Jesus means by this story. Just to remind you, when I was a child, I was always told that a parable was an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It's a bit like a joke. If you have to have a joke explained to you because you don't get it, it becomes very painful. And sometimes you don't actually get the joke even then. I recall being told a joke as a child, and I'm sure it took me 20 years finally to hit on what it actually was about. But we move on. A parable is to describe things as they are, and not necessarily how they got there. And if anybody wants to understand the parable of the weeds and the wheat, then you obviously can see that that speaks to the world today: people around us who are perhaps not keeping up the party spirit, who don't play the game according to the rules, or who in some way seem to get a better advantage by doing things that are incorrect or bad or difficult, while we, trying to do our very best.... Well, you don't need me to say any more, because it's only too real. And that's the meaning.

So what are we to do about this, in the light of what we just learned from Romans 8, and the sense that humanity is still in charge of the created order? How are we supposed to tend this field, full of weeds and full of wheat? Well, the answer is, first of all, we need to continue with that relationship in which we have been restored with Father God, that relationship in which we abide in Him, and He abides in us, which the Holy Spirit gives us, this new birth, this new life, and enables us to become, well, if you like, a new creation, remade by God and restored to His image. And then, looking forward to the end of the age, where it's the job of the angels to separate the weeds from the wheat, we tend the garden, we care for it. It means of course, that we remember again the beginning of Romans 8: "There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus." We are called not to judge. We're called to tend, to care and to show loving-kindness to everybody. We have to recall all the teachings that we've received about being kind to others; forgiving sins, otherwise we won't be forgiven

ourselves; to go and to show love to people, of course, first of all to our brothers and sisters in Christ, because that's what holds us together, but also we have to show that love to the people around us, to those who are in need, and to show that love to people, even our enemies. But it's a job that we don't do in our own power and in our own strength: to do it in that way, would be to go back to square one, and to have learned nothing. We do do it by holding close to the living God, by looking forward with eager anticipation, to the time when everything will be renewed, and the God of heaven will come and rule again over us all. When this happens, then all the evil and the good will be separated and sorted out, each into the right and appropriate piles. And then we can trust our God to bring us into a Kingdom and a place where we will see Him, always forever, being at His feet, worshipping Him and honouring Him in His Realm.

Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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