

“...in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest.”

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

It is good to be with you as your curate for the first time this morning. And I hope, for all of you, it is good to be back in Church.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds centres on the idea that God allows both goodness and wickedness to flourish here on earth. It is particularly appropriate at this time, for we've seen the best and the worst of human nature over the four months since people last gathered together to pray here in St John's. We've seen medical personnel and care home staff put their lives on the line, and in some cases give their lives, for the common good. We've seen the natural world revive as the pressure we human beings put on it eases off just a little, with cleaner air and water, less noise, and wildlife returning to our towns and cities. We've seen a great revival of community spirit, with neighbours looking out for the vulnerable, and we've also seen a great global effort of medical science taking place across boundaries of nation, religion, race, and system of government.

We've also learned a lot about who is genuinely indispensable to society: when most of us were told to stay at home if we possibly could, those who still had to go into work were often those least financially rewarded for their labours. Supermarket workers, staff in meat plants, fruit and vegetable pickers, truck drivers, security guards, home helps, taxi drivers, as well as those working in the NHS and care homes – these were the people who had to go to work right through the worst of the pandemic, and many of them earn wages that make it impossible for them to imagine providing a secure home for their families. These were the people who died in disproportionate numbers.

Young adults are the most vulnerable to the economic shock of the pandemic that is now landing; a very high proportion are on insecure contracts and have already lost their jobs or are gravely threatened by redundancy; most live in rented accommodation with insecure tenancies and can be evicted for no reason at two months' notice. Did it take a pandemic, did it take this appalling death toll, for us to finally address the generational and class imbalances that have been building for decades under governments of all hues? That is a question we can never answer, but these issues have been put in front of our noses now. There is space for a different conversation; even many of our politicians seem to be interested in one. The possibility of new hope can vanish in the blink of an eye; but for the moment it is with us. If we were to translate this hope into concrete change, we would indeed reap a rich harvest from amidst the cruelties of the coronavirus pandemic.

We've also seen plenty of negative things, most obviously in the appalling death toll, perhaps most of all in the failure to avoid the terrible catastrophe in care homes. We've also seen idiotic behaviour, and naked profiteering, and failures of political leadership, and grown adults indulging in the most juvenile refusal to look hard reality in the face. We've seen all these failures in this country, and in many other countries.

Yet the good seems to outweigh the bad many times over. Most people have been responsible, even if media attention and social media finger wagging focuses on the selfish minority. Far more people have been inspired to do good than to exploit the situation. Amid the choking weeds of this terrible year, there has been a rich harvest of goodness; the human race has, in the main, justified God when he looked at His creation and proclaimed it to be very good.

The wheat and the weeds must grow together, for that is God's way with creation. Inevitably we ask ourselves whether God needed to create the universe in a way that had so much suffering in it. Many of us struggle with our faith given the suffering in the world, and many people reject the very idea of the existence of God as a result. Yet it has always seemed to me, no matter how uncomfortable the thought is, that we can't have a universe without suffering unless God had us all on remote controls, like robots. We've all met fathers here on earth who dominate and control their children to ensure they are always 'well behaved'; they aren't people we admire or aspire to being.

Heaven forbid that we should worship a God that was like one of these hard cases for social services. So, our heavenly Father gives us freedom, to make our own mistakes and to work our own wonders; for we have seen many people work wonders during this pandemic, most of them people of little account by the supposed standards of the world.

God gives freedom to viruses too, for they are part of his creation, and a vital part of the world's ecological balance. Without viruses, bacteria would have no natural predator, and would simply overwhelm the rest of life – plants, animals, and indeed humans. It seems odd to speak of viruses in this way, but we should never forget that in the words of the famous phrase from St John's Gospel that God gave His beloved Son to save, as the Greek puts it, the kosmos – in other words not just us, but the whole of God's creation. Here is where our reading from St Paul's letter to the Romans this morning is so timely, for he speaks of the whole of creation – humans and viruses, bats and bacteria – groaning to be set free from its bondage to death and decay, groaning in labour pains for the future that will be born. Not the future that might be born, but the future that will be born for it has already been secured by the work of redemption carried out by Christ on the Cross. Now, in the primeval story of Christianity and Judaism, in Genesis, it was not viruses but human beings that upset the divinely ordained balance of creation. And it is we human beings in the year 2020 who are putting the divine ecological balance in jeopardy; but it was also a human being, the Jesus Christ who is truly God and truly human, who brought about a new future, a future that, as St Paul reminds us, we have been adopted into through our membership of the Church. This new future is already being born in God's Church today, here in St John's and around the world. Oh, it's terribly vulnerable and terribly flawed, as we live it out in practice, but at our best we are a sign of a new ecology and a new economy, not built on dynamics of power or acquisition of material things, but of truth, beauty, and goodness.

As the epicentres of the pandemic are now shifting to countries with weaker health systems and poorer people, we have a chance to bring that universal kingdom of goodness a step closer, and to join those using the pandemic to bring people together across boundaries. Our Bishop has asked us to raise £50,000 across the diocese in a month for the church in Sudan and South Sudan, for something as simple as soap. The very poorest people there face a terrible choice between going hungry or getting the virus. The church sinks roots deep into the poorest and most vulnerable communities in the Sudans, and can get to people outside the reach of international aid agencies. A small amount of money here goes a long way in Sudan or South Sudan, and soap and sanitation material, simple but beyond the means of the poorest people there, saves lives. So far, the appeal has raised £24,000 and counting. You can donate online or send a cheque to Church House.

Just as those who are considered of least account in society are often those who are in fact most important, it is small-scale actions like this that do most to rebuild hope in a world riven not only by the virus, but by political tensions and outright hatreds. We have it in our power to renew hope in our world, in God's creation. As we look around our spiritual home to which we have returned, pause for a moment to consider what crises and tragedies, what plagues and wars, the stones of St John's have witnessed over 890 years. Yet it still stands, home to a living community of faith. It stands not only as a monument to people's faith in God but to God's faith in people, a divine trust in humanity demonstrated by Him taking the risk to let the wheat and the weeds grow freely, in the confidence that a rich harvest will result. Power to help the wheat grow more fruitfully in the midst of the weeds lies, with the help of God, with us.

And now to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be ascribed all might, majesty, dominion, and power, as is most justly His due, now and forever. Amen.

Sermon Preached at St John's Devizes on Sunday 19 July 2020, the 6th Sunday After Trinity