

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43; Romans 8.12-25; Isaiah 44.6-8
St. Andrew's Totteridge: 8 & 10 am
Sunday 23rd July 2017: 6th Sunday after Trinity

In the power of the Holy Spirit, may God bless this voice that speaks and all the ears that hear, through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.

The holidays are upon us! The children are back in the bosom of the family, and there'll be lots of opportunity for everyone to have marvellous moments of quality time together! At least that's what we hope. There will also be lots of opportunities for children, who may have worked really hard to behave like little angels at school, to relax into a more honest way of being in the comfort and security of home.

In other words, there'll be lots of opportunities for them to question why they should do this and not that. And sooner or later, the opportunity will also arise for mummy or daddy to respond, 'Because I say so' or 'because mummy knows best'. Which means, 'there is an answer, but it's impossible, or I haven't got time, to put it into words, words which you would understand.' And in response, you'll have heard that time-honoured reply, 'daddy, that's not fair.'

The same response can be given to those who criticise God - that God cannot put the answer into words which humans could understand, so you must simply do what God commands because God tells you to, and God knows best.

So why should we do what God wants? – especially when, as the 17th c. philosopher, Thomas Hobbes said, 'the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short', or as H. G. Wells put it when he predicted that the human race, which began in a cave behind a wind-break, will end in the disease-soaked ruins of a slum. Cheery thoughts indeed!

Many have sought to explain why we should do what God wants, both before and since Jesus offered us the parable of the wheat and tares, as it's sometimes known, without it must be admitted, much success. F.Y.I., Tares are a kind of weed which look identical to wheat when it first grows, and only becomes identifiable as something foul tasting and unhealthy when it reaches maturity. Which gives us all the more reason to consider this parable very carefully indeed, even if, in the end, we really must just do what we're told.

We know now, don't we, that the best explanation for the physical evolution of humanity is the process described by Darwin, where each individual competes with others for the chance to live long enough to reproduce, and avoiding those things which threaten our survival by bringing us pain. Were it not for pain, we'd never have learned to avoid things like predators, disease, fire or drowning.

To which we might respond, 'if there is a loving Creator, couldn't he at least have kept my life free from undeserved suffering?' Well, yes, he could, but then he would have had to curtail your freedom to walk into dangerous situations, or inhibit your freedom to destroy your health by addiction to harmful sugars, fats, or intoxicants, if you so choose - and he would have had to remove your enemies right to his or her free will every time they chose to oppress you.

This is what the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares is really all about. If the farmer had tried to dig up all the harmful plants as soon as he became aware that there was something harmful in his field, he'd have had to dig up all the good ones too, because they're all hopelessly intertwined - just as our capacity for good and evil is intertwined in all our hearts. If God chose to destroy us all, I imagine the universal outcry of 'but Father, it's just not fair!' would be quite deafening.

So, to those who complain in this way, the answer must be another question, 'Could you do better than God has managed to do so far? Could you produce individual human beings capable of freely choosing to love one another, without destroying the whole purpose of the project because of a few who choose to hate?' I doubt it.

None of us deserve to suffer as we do, but then no-one deserves all the good things that happen to us either. I realise that this isn't much help to those who are in acute agony for whatever reason, but I do believe that, ultimately, our God is a merciful God, who either helps us endure our pains, that we may learn from them and turn them to advantage, or who can take us out of the earthly equation if he sees fit. In the end, it seems there is little to be gained from asking 'why suffering?' and rather more to be discovered in asking for help to cope with it, that we may begin to see the inheritance of the glory that lies beyond it.

This is Paul's message, as he reminds the Romans that they live because Christ was raised from the dead, and that his Spirit continues to live within them (v.8-11). The embrace of salvation is wide – if some are 'perishing' or 'condemned' at the present time, this is not God's final word. By placing our trust in God, we can ask him how he can use us in our suffering to help others and become stronger in love ourselves. **Amen.**

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The Parable of Weeds among the Wheat

24 He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷And 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?" ²⁸He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" ²⁹But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let 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." '

Jesus Explains the Parable of the Weeds

36 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.' ³⁷He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴²and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

The New Revised Standard Version (Anglicized Edition), copyright 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Romans 8.12-25

12 So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³for 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. ¹⁴For 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, ¹⁷and 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.

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that 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. ²²We 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, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Isaiah 44.6-8

⁶ Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. ⁷ Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me. Who has announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us what is yet to be. ⁸ Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one.