

Sermon for Sunday 19th July 2020, by Andrew Hurst
Romans 8:12-25, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

I have to confess that I am not a fan of New Year's Eve. It seems to me that we count in the New Year excitedly and at midnight celebrate with greetings of Happy New Year - but when we wake up in the morning on New Year's Day, already someone has been stabbed or dishonest, or one country has fired a missile at another or invaded its neighbour. It's all rather same old-same old. It seems that all that has happened is that the clock ticked over and we hung up a new calendar.

Before everyone thinks that the new Curate is some sort of "Bah Humbug" sort of chap, I am not at all. I love a party and I am looking forward to many, especially with you. And when I was in my late teens and early twenties in what for me were the Roaring Eighties, I enjoyed many a New Year's Eve bash with my highly sociable friends - which, incidentally, always took place at one particular house at the far end of Derby Street in the Parish of Newnham - so if anyone in the congregation was living then in Derby Street, Hardwick Street or Merton Street - I am really sorry. (Honestly, really sorry.) They were great affairs, with everyone going nuts at midnight and massed hugging and snogging. (Shows the times and how old I am - nobody says "snogging" anymore.)

But I have become a little older and a lot balder and now for my love of parties, I can't really get the whole New Year's Eve thing any more. Luckily it is also my wife Teresa's birthday - so we do have a party anyway and I always enjoy it. There: I hope I have reassured you.

So the trouble is, the world doesn't seem to change. We have many a good resolution, and we genuinely hope and wish for better, kinder times, and all round improvements in ourselves and society, but by the end of January such aspirations and resolutions rather trickle into the sand, like the reality of oh so many lapsed gym memberships.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus confronts head on this problem of this imperfect world and its rejection of God. He does so in the parable of the wheat and the weeds (or tares). We learn that the field is our world in which we live, which is God's. The field was sowed by God with the good seed that is the children of God. But along come the weeds - and so in amongst the good in the world is all the bad in the world, all that makes for separation from God, all that seems never to change, over which sometimes we despair.

One of the comforting things about this parable is that God knows God's world. This is the world and there it is. God has no illusions. We do not live in a perfect world and God knows we don't.

In the Parable, the workers have a solution, which is to weed the field of the bad as we go, plucking out the weeds; but Jesus says no - that is for the harvest - the end time. Then there will be the reckoning. The world is as God has made it. We are free to live and breathe and act with full responsibility, and not as perfect clones like serried ranks of television advert families with lovely teeth and implausibly youthful and beautiful parents. We are who we are, with great capacity for good, and so great capacity for sin; we can love and hate, succeed and fail. But when we love, we love because we want to love, not because we are made to love. We are made for love, but we are not made to love. And we are made for love as children of God. Our relationship is with God our Father. And if we weed as we go, then there is no place for redemption - and well, who is going to cast the first stone ...

So in the Parable, Jesus takes us on a whistle stop cosmic sweep of the world as it was, the world as it is, and the world as it is to come. We lurch to the end time - and the sense of judgement. The end time, the judgement is important. The world asks routinely, especially in the midst of the horrors of the latest, greatest evil humankind inflicts on itself, where is God? The answer is God is still there, maybe unperceived, but ultimately present in the judgement.

That is more and greater than what we can do to each other. There is more to come. God has not gone away from our imperfect world, and God is not going away. And what Jesus promises in the Parable at that time is the promise of the Kingdom, and that, rather beautifully, the righteous will shine like the sun.

Yet judgement is always disconcerting. But judgement matters because God matters. If anything matters then it carries integrity, value and distinction: if there was no sense of judgement, or structure we might as well please ourselves before God as children might with indulgent parents who either don't care or don't notice what their children get up to. It rarely ends well. We want to end well, because in our end is our beginning - a new beginning with God. But it is still disconcerting.

In our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul carries on the theme of being the children of God, and illuminates our true position in terms of how we live our lives, and how we come to consider judgement. As is often the case when reading Paul's Epistles, following the argument feels like a form of theological white-water rafting, such is the onward rush of the conceptual twists. So let's tighten our life jackets, grab a paddle and set off into the stream.

Paul too takes us all the way back to the beginning, and all the way forward to the end. Paul puts us in the Creation narrative and of Adam's Fall from Eden; he invokes the groaning pains and labours of childbirth, of how Creation has been groaning in its wait for humankind, Adam-kind, to be back in its right relationship with God. And Paul teaches us that now, through Christ, we through Christ, through Faith, become the very children of God, that good seed of in the Parable. It is the language of adoption, of becoming the children of God and the heirs to the Kingdom. It is ours, through Faith in the risen Lord who died for our sin: that's all, enough and everything.

Paul tells us that our suffering is worth the promise of the glory to come. One sense of the suffering to which Paul refers, can also be that suffering we feel when the world goes wrong. We are back to New Year's Day - when peace and love has not broken out, but someone has opened fire in a shopping Mall in America. We suffer when our world is not as we want it to be, and as we know that God wants it to be - we suffer at an unloving, greedy, sinful world, of abused power and abusive interactions. We suffer when we despair.

But when we hope in God's glory - we have what we need. We have a sure promise - of God's love that conquers the suffering of the good that is inter-twined with the bad. We can live in this world because God is living in this word. We are not alone, we are not abandoned, God has not gone away. It's a promise.

Today, in this Church, shortly Rachel will once more preside at the Eucharist. We have been away from the Lord's table for a long time for good reason, and we shall all decide when and how to return. But as we begin to do so for the first time it is like a new year - today is a new start, a resumption, borne off the back of the richness I know that you have all shared in fellowship, worship and prayer that has brought you closer to God and each other in ways nobody really expected back in March.

This is then a new dawn, and the world is not perfect - but it is God's world, and we are in it, full of hope, full of love, filled with love, and today, of all days, on the threshold of something familiar, but something ever-new. And that is worth a party. Happy New Year.
Amen