

BIBLE READING: Psalm 139: 1-12, 23-24 Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

SERMON

A conversation between two Puritans: "There are none so pure as me and thee, and sometimes I worry about thee."

Or here is a prayer written by a devout worshipper of God almighty. "I thank you Lord that you have placed me with those who sit in your temple, not with those who sit at the street corner. I rise early and they rise early. I rise to the words of the law; they rise to vain things. I labour and they labour. I labour and receive a reward; they labour and receive no reward. I run and they run. I run to the life of the world to come; they run to destruction.

It must be comforting to be so sure - not only of one's own salvation but also of another's damnation. It must feel good to be so certain - so sure of right and wrong, black and white, good and bad. It might feel good, but it is not the way of Jesus - he does not offer his followers salvation based on their righteousness - rather their salvation comes through his sinless sacrifice on a cross that was meant for you and me.

Luke reports a parable of Jesus (Luke 18:9-14) about the self-righteous pharisee and the tax-collector. Where the words of the pharisee were full of self-confidence and certainty, the tax-collector could only cry out, "Have mercy on me Lord - a sinner!" Jesus then said "I tell you, the tax-collector went home justified - right with God."

The parable of the wheat and the weeds tells us many things - but the theme I want to examine is assurance.

Reflect on this - are you wheat or weed? Are the people you know wheat or weed? How do you know?

I've often reflected that I could have a perfect church - as long as it had no members. No-one would disagree with me. My mission objectives would be accepted readily and enthusiastically. But it is not like that, is it? Many people act as if it was though! Because, you see, the "real" christians, the "committed" ones, or (as Paul Keating would say) "the true believers" know that if they are to have an effective ministry they need to get rid of the dead weight - to shed the weeds as it were. Unfortunately both sides of a church that splits often see themselves in this way. Danger signs to look out for when you go to a church, is when people start placing adjectives in front of the word Christian. Adjectives such as, mature, born again, tongues-speaking, bible-centred, immature, Sunday, radical, hot-headed, lazy, etc..

Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in 'Gulag Archipelago', "If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."

A sociologist made a study of anglican churches in England. He observed that there were basically two types of church - Associational and Communal. Associational churches attempt to separate the wheat from the weeds. To be a member, one must make a personal statement of faith and agree to abide by certain principles or rules. The communal church makes little attempt to separate the wheat from the weeds. Membership comes as an infant, or just by sheer perseverance in attending week after week!

Most churches have a bit of both sorts of church in them. The interesting observation made by the sociologist was about how Associational and Communal churches see and respond to evil.

Associational churches tend to project evil onto all those who are not part of the flock. The reasoning being "we are saved - therefore those who are not part of our group are not saved." Communal churches find it hard to discern evil at all. Especially at a personal level.

Once a church starts down the path of certainty, assured of their salvation and therefore assured of the damnation of all others - it is really no surprise that all forms of evil can become justified in the name of Christ. Torture and violence become persuasive tools of salvation.

The parable of the wheat and weeds disturbs me because God seems content (or at least resigned) to allow the wheat and weeds to grow together. Sometimes my fingers itch to pull out a few of the weeds - to lay down the law - the "do-it-this-way-or-else-get-out" law. But Jesus never-ever works like that.

It's true, he talks about the gospel dividing families, he talks of having brought a sword - but we as Christians are not to do the work of dividing or separating - it is our goal to promote unity and peace between Christians.

So how can you know if you are wheat or weeds? How can you be assured of salvation? How will you recognise a fellow christian?

By the fruit that they bear - does your life, do theirs show the evidence of salvation - joy, peace, faith and love? The words of the hymn we are about to sing makes clear nothing we can do can either secure our salvation or assure us of it. It is only Jesus the Rock can save us. Only by his blood are we cleansed. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. Only Jesus can save us.

Assurance comes in realising and accepting that it is only because Jesus transforms us from weeds to wheat that we are saved. All of us have sinned - none of us are righteous in God's eyes.

We are God's field of wheat and weeds. No-one can judge another, especially when we become aware that it is only by God's grace that we are here.

Let us encourage the weeds in our community to worship with us, that they too may know the miraculous transformation that happens when people meet Jesus and are turned from weeds to wheat. Amen.