

**REFLECTION FOR THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY  
(19.07.20)**

**By Revd Paul Timmis**

**Readings: Wisdom of Solomon 12: 13, 16-19 & Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43**

Some of us from Martin Way gathered on Zoom the other day. It'll come as no surprise to you that at the heart of our conversations lay the question as to when it might be possible to worship together in the church building once again and what that might look like. Everyone in the Church is having the same conversation these days it seems.

But before we broached that subject, we returned to the document produced by our friends in the United Reformed Church (that Steph referred to last week) and we allowed ourselves some time and space to sit with such questions as:

What has been good or valuable about lockdown that we would like to continue and develop in the coming months?

What has caused us to think, 'I wonder if we could try this...?'

What have we learned about ourselves, about our congregation, and about the world that must shape what we do now?

As we took turns to speak, we listened to one another and soon began to see that something else that Steph had said last week was indeed true - we *were* all starting from different places.

Some had enjoyed elements of lockdown; the slower pace of life, the increased opportunities to sit and think and/or to explore the local area on foot. Others had found it all exceptionally difficult - already challenging situations being exacerbated by being confined to the home. There was an appreciation of how much church activities mattered and were missed but also the realisation that, for some, whilst recent months were merely an extension of the isolation that they were *already* experiencing, at least now people were phoning them regularly and bringing them service sheets etc. More than one person spoke of getting to know people better in a number of telephone conversations than they'd managed through years of sitting near them in church. The conversation moved on as we began, tentatively, to consider what all of this might teach us, what might

be worth holding on to or trying as and when we decide that we can return to our building in some way – or as we wait to do so. It's a conversation we'll need to return to.

The truth is, of course, that, whether or not our first thought is to what *the Church* might do and when, all of us would do well to reflect upon our experiences of lockdown to see what we have learned and to determine what we want to carry with us - or let go of - as and when we emerge more fully from it. Whether as individuals or together as the church, time spent engaging with such a task now would surely be well spent. We can - and may well need to - start small in our thinking but what's only the germ of an idea at this stage (if I can still use that word these days), might have the potential to flourish into something beyond our wildest dreams if cultivated well. Who knows? We certainly won't without giving it a go. So, let's plant some seeds, as it were, and see where they take us.

When we pick up the gospel story today Jesus is still talking about cultivating.

Last week we heard him tell a story about a sower who flings seed far and wide hoping for the best. In our story today the seed has already been sown but it seems that, under the cover of darkness, an enemy has undertaken a covert weed-planting-operation in the hope of scuppering the sower's harvest. Some suggest that the weeds in question can be assumed to look similar to wheat and be poisonous – but, even if that's not the case, anyone with a garden will know how invasive and problematic weeds can be. Think brambles, bindweed or ground elder.

Whatever type of weed we're talking about, the emphasis in this story seems to be on the sower's patience. When those around him ask the sower whether he wants them to gather up the weeds for burning, he resists. 'Leave them until harvest time' he says, 'let them both have their time in the sun, we'll sort things out later.'

A perfectly reasonable reading of the story could then be, 'It's not our job (as human beings) to judge others, or to decide who represents the wheat and who represents the weeds. We shouldn't be so quick to label or classify other people. It's not for us to say who's in and who's out. Only God can make such judgements, and in due course will do so, so let's be more patient with one another in the meantime.'

As one commentator has written, 'Taken in this way, the story becomes a parable of grace' (Douglas Hare). Sadly, the explanation offered by Matthew's Jesus doesn't say this.

But here's the thing about parables. Jesus used them to speak about God because God isn't easy to describe. He'd preface everything by saying, 'God's kingdom is a bit like...' and he'd tell stories that carried within them multiple layers of meaning. Jesus' parables are beautiful and powerful precisely because they have the ability to speak to people in different ways at different times. Which suggests, to me at least, that whenever someone tries to force a parable in such a way so as to make its meaning definitive, it loses some of its beauty and its power is diminished – and that's the case even if that explanation seemingly comes from Jesus himself. So, I'm sorry if this disappoints you but I have absolutely no interest in exploring the explanation of Jesus' parable of weeds among wheat that Matthew's gospel offers us today. To my mind, it undermines rather than enhances the parable it seeks to explain. And anyway, there's surely enough to contend with in the here and now these days without worrying ourselves silly about fiery furnaces in the future.

Jesus' parables can operate on multiple levels, and may even say things to us today that Jesus may not have considered – and that's OK – that's evidence that God's Spirit is alive and at work in and through Scripture, isn't it, providing that reading, that interpretation, sits comfortably within – and doesn't jar against – the Bible's overarching themes? So how about we read our parable like *this* today and think of plans rather than plants?

An individual or church has hopes and dreams for what she/he/it might do post-lockdown. As germs of ideas are formed, seeds are planted, and plans begin to emerge. And it isn't necessarily that there's an enemy out there seeking to scupper those plans, but human beings aren't perfect, and neither are all of our ideas. Not all will prove to be life giving and life enhancing. Some might prove to deny life and/or choke the life out of better, more sustainable plans. But there is wisdom in waiting, in giving all ideas some time to develop so that a better, more informed judgement can be made about them at some point. Then we can ask the, 'Whose kingdom is this really building?' question and, if we can honestly answer, 'God's kingdom' we'll know that we're on the right lines - or not - and act accordingly. Let anyone with ears listen!