

SERMON FOR TRINITY 6 | 23.07.2017

A week away in Malta: sounded a good idea back in November and it proved to be an even better idea in the middle of July! With guides books in hand there seemed quite enough to do in a little more than five days. And Malta is easy: they drive on the left, have familiar red telephone boxes and postboxes and the sun shines all the time! That much everyone knows – the product of British colonial rule for over 150 years.

What we hadn't appreciated before we went was that actually the usual language isn't English at all but Malti, a weird fusion of Italian and Arabic, using Latin script. Most younger people are bilingual but road signs (where they exist) are totally confusing and this little blob in the middle of the Mediterranean is not, and probably never was, that 'English': and while we ate quite well, we never saw a single sheep, goat or cow in the whole time we were there. In practice, things were not as we thought they would be.

Which is not unlike today's key reading, part of the batch of parables that fills this section of St Matthew' Gospel. Like our brief experience of Malta, parables – Jesus' way of teaching what the Kingdom of Heaven is like – challenge our assumptions, twist our perceptions and leave us with plenty of unanswered questions.

Having begun Chapter 13 with the very familiar story of the Sower who throws his seed onto very different types of soil – indicating that only a minority will ever receive the Word of God with enthusiasm – Jesus takes a similar scenario (a well-disposed farmer with good seed) and makes a completely point.

Here the wheat field looks like it is doing well until the sharp eyed among the slaves notice that there, in and amongst the wheat, are patches of totally useless wild rice - zizania, sometimes translated as darnel, a weed very familiar to farmers in Israel still.

The instant reaction of the slaves is to 'get in there and do something'. With some effort surely it would be possible to rip out the darnel so as to allow the wheat a better of chance of thriving on its own. You don't want to contaminate the good stuff with the parasites.

Or in more moral terms you want to protect the good and the healthy from the scandals and temptations that exposure to the weeds would inevitably result in.

Now you can't push parables too much: they only take you so far and it is wise not to be too literal when trying to work out what they mean. But we can go along with this canny farmer as he restrains his servants: the roots of the wheat are so intertwined with the roots of the wild rice that all you will do is damage the good crop while trying to get shot of the weeds. Leave well alone: later on, at Harvest time it will be far easier to work out which is which.

But doesn't this go against the mood of other parables? What about the warning to those who tempt children to sin – wouldn't it be better if they drown themselves; or what about the requirement to cut off a foot or pluck out an eye if it leads a person into sin? Better to go to Heaven maimed than to be intact but cast into the fires of Hell?

This is all hyperbole of course and we ought not to get too carried away by the language: surely Jesus' point is far more subtle. *Don't you recognize, says Jesus, that inside all of us are bits that we don't like, ideas that gnaw away at us and are different from, and less good, than the rest?* Take the story of Jesus getting cross with St Peter. Here is Peter, generally so loyal and faithful – and then he comes up with something utterly contrary to what Jesus has in mind and Jesus shouts at Peter: *Get behind me Satan: you are a stumbling block (literally: what you have done is a scandal to me); your mind is full of earthly not heavenly things.*

Jesus is not writing Peter off, of course he isn't. As we know he will entrust the whole mission of the Church to him and to the other disciples who are, equally, full of mixed motives. But he knows that, there in the wheat, there also lies emotions and thoughts that are not – in the any sense – “harvest”.

And here we find ourselves pushing the story as far as it will go. Wheat cannot turn into tares, or tares into wheat; we all know that. But the story of Peter, put alongside this parable, gives us more hope.

And what the farmer appears to suggest is that we, this complicated bag of ideas and feelings, need more time; eventually there will come a day of reckoning but for the moment it is hard to tell by mere appearances what lies in a person's heart.

Which is why Pope Francis' teaching on Mercy has been so radically refreshing – and so mistrusted by those who like to keep things neat and tidy. His emphasis on giving second, third and fourth chances to those who makes mistakes and get things wrong seems be exactly what Jesus is encouraging in this Gospel.

Yet even in our own Church there is a tendency among some to want to hold separate 'the pure' and the 'untainted' – to keep them from the contamination of biblical interpretations which are more permissive and generous. Two congregations in the Chelmsford Diocese have recently, and very publically, declared that they will not now accept the ministry of their Diocesan bishop, Stephen Cottrell because of his more liberal teaching on ethics and the sacraments. It is hard to imagine a more damaging attack on the unity and the mission of the Church. The back door consecration of 'kosher' bishops in foreign places seems to me to be far more scandalous than the inclinations of those seeking to find ways of showing mercy to those in need.

Unlike Arthur Miller's Salem, we cannot ever be certain who is 'in' and who is 'out'. The teaching about the first being last would suggest we will all be surprised by the list of who God will accept - show mercy to - on the Last Day.

Most of all we need to remember that the decision is not – and will never be – down to us. And our relief about that ought to be never ending because it means that we too will be shown a degree of mercy that we do not deserve.

As the words of Marty Haughan's Offertory Hymn at 10am says so well:

***Gather us in, the lost and forsaken,
gather us in the blind and the lame;
call to us now and we shall awaken,
we shall arise at the sound of our name...***