

Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2023; Benefice Holy Communion,  
Oswaldkirk.

Recently I was having an in-depth discussion with a friend about God's judgement, always a tricky subject, and who will be allowed into Heaven. My friend said, "I'm not sure I would like Heaven if Hitler is there". I recently also had a discussion session with the junior children at St Hilda's school also about Heaven and judgement. One of the questions put to me was this, 'if you have someone who has led a good life always kind and generous, but not religious and you have someone who has been 'religious' all their life but was horrible to everyone, which one will go to Heaven?'

Any offers?!! Shall we have a show of hands? Maybe not! I found myself side-stepping the question and saying Jesus will decide! But that's why there will be a Judgement one day because only God has the big picture. Only God knows the right answer.

On this, we are often challenged, especially when someone is suffering, or dying with the question, echoing the Psalmist, 'why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?', or 'Why does your God allow the innocent to suffer? The best answer I can give is 'I don't know, we can hope God knows and His love will break through'. Then, all I can do is offer compassion, journey with them, and demonstrate that love. As the reading from Isaiah tells us, God is the first and last, all knowing. Only He has the complete picture about all of us and the universe, we do not.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus follows on from the Parable of the Sower to the parable of the Wheat and Tares (or weeds). The point of the parable is completely different; the parable of the Sower shows how people receive and respond to the Word of God, and the parable

of the wheat and tares shows how God will judge at the end of this age. It also teaches us that there is a hostile power in the universe, seeking to destroy the good seed. The lesson is that we must always be on our guard. It also teaches us how hard it is to distinguish between those who are in the Kingdom, have a good heart, and those who are not. The parable says that the wheat and the tares grow together because they appear identical. We know too appearances can be deceiving but we still tend to be too quick to classify people or situations and label them right or wrong without first discovering the background facts. We must carefully and thoughtfully give our time and energy to discern, working with others to come to as much of an informed picture as possible. That might also mean moving away from our own blinkered view and accepting something different based on the views and experiences of others. Inevitably because we don't have the big picture, we may get things wrong, or at least not completely right. All we can do is try and come to an informed opinion and proceed accordingly, follow our consciences and intuition, work with as many others as we can to determine the right way forward, to build relationships, create safe communities and demonstrate right actions.

Neither is it the job of the church to weed out those it thinks appear to be Christians or not, or situations that it thinks requires a 'Christian response' which may be misguided because we don't have the informed picture. We often hear of this being played out in congregations and denominations, with some determined to root out what is considered the 'weed' who is anyone who does not agree with the "right" interpretation of Scripture, liturgical practice, or a particular issue. There are also those who pronounce judgment on people outside the church – on people of other faiths, for instance – declaring them to be destined for eternal damnation. Of course, as human beings we have our own opinions and views, but these can

never be allowed to represent the whole story, because we don't know the whole story. Only God does.

Jesus too makes it clear that we cannot be certain who is "in" or who is "out". In fact, he says, God's right judgment will take many by surprise. Thank God it is not up to us! What then can we do? St. Paul reminds us in his letter to be patient, and to always hope, trust God and follow the Holy Spirit's promptings. We can leave the weeding to the angels and get on with the mission Jesus has given us – proclaiming the *good* news of the kingdom of God and doing as near as we can the right thing.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

