

Good and Evil Have Been Sown Together

A sermon preached by Canon Bill Scrivener at Christ Church Cathedral on July 20, 2008.

I am a big fan of the sci-fi/horror movies that were prevalent in the 50s and 60s. These included movies that relied as much on psychology as special effects to produce a feeling of dread, of fright. One of my favorites is “Invasion of the Body Snatchers”. This is the movie that featured the so-called “pod people” – alien creatures who, when hatched from their pods, took on the form and likeness of a living person, who was then disposed of. The replicated people looked normal enough, but there was something off about them – they seemed to be soulless. What made the movie scary of course was that one couldn’t tell – or tell easily - who was a real person and who was a pod person.

The movie was a product of, and a commentary on, the political climate of the 50s. The big scare of the 50s was that Communists would infiltrate the fabric of our society and take over from within. This fear is what gave such power to the McCarthy hearings. Communists were everywhere, he proclaimed. They looked and behaved just like us, but their goal was to take over the US. You couldn’t trust anyone; you needed to suspect everyone. Paranoia was rampant. As the Chad Mitchell Trio sang in their song “The John Birch Society:

You cannot trust your neighbor, or even next of kin.
If mommy is a commie then you gotta turn her in.

So, in their zeal to root out the Communists, the McCarthyites and their ilk swept up a lot of innocent people and destroyed a lot of innocent lives. Collateral damage, they might have said; unfortunate, but unavoidable in such a cosmic struggle.

It’s helpful to bear this bit of history in mind as we reflect on today’s Gospel. This is the parable of what, in the old days, was referred to as the wheat and the tares, but which we now translate as “good seed” and “weeds”. In this parable Jesus offers an image of the farmer who plants good seed. As it is growing, an unnamed enemy comes in the night and plants weeds among the good seed. Now it’s too bad, I think, that we’ve lost the sense of wheat and tares, because the imagery is actually somewhat subtle. This isn’t a case of someone planting dandelions in your vegetable garden. Tares were a kind of weed that superficially looked like wheat. The aim of the enemy was not simply to create the nuisance of additional weeding. His aim would have been to trick the farmer into confusing the wheat and tares, harvesting them together and thus reducing the value or quality of the overall harvest. Fortunately the farmer is apprised of this by someone astute enough to tell the difference. Once so informed, he avoids the temptation to try to weed out the tares, because he might damage the wheat crop at the same time. Instead, he opts to wait until the crop is ready, and then harvest them together. At that point, they will be separated and the tares will be burned.

Now this is a fairly straightforward parable. We don’t really need Jesus’ explanation later to get the point that evil has been “planted” in this world along with the good, and that God, rather than separating them out early (wouldn’t that be nice?), will sort them out on the day of judgment. But,

as is the case in many of these parables about the Kingdom of God, Jesus is not confronting us with a choice (will you be like the wheat, or the tares?). Rather he is describing the way things are - this is reality. Good and evil exist side by side in this world; sometimes we have a hard time separating them out; God will be the one to do the separating in the appointed time.

Nor do we need political religionists to underscore the reality of this. There is ample evidence of evil in the world, apart from politics. The examples are all around us: 9/11; the bloody conflict in the Middle East, Darfur and other places; murder and destruction being done in the name of one's group's claim to superiority over another. These events, and others, are reminders to us not only that we are, none of us, safe in this world, but that Jesus is telling the truth - evil has been sown in this world, by the enemy. It grows up alongside the good, and, like the tares, it often assumes the guise of the very good it is opposing.

Now to say that may be taken as an invitation to paranoia. Maybe we shouldn't trust anyone. Maybe we will become like the characters in the film, never knowing whether anyone we meet is genuine and good, or fake and evil.

But I think that the larger invitation is to see that the world is complex, and that good and bad exist together. They are entangled, one with another. This is true in nations, communities and individuals. And therefore, the farmer dares not attempt to separate the wheat and tares prematurely, because he might destroy the one in his zeal to root out the other. We, too, are cautioned to be careful, lest we bring harm to the good in our zeal to root out the evil.

Of course we are called to search out evil in the world. We are warned of its presence. We are to oppose it when we see it. But we are reminded, through this parable, that there is a final accounting to be made, and that that accounting is not ours to make. We are not the Lord of the Harvest, God is. And it is left to God, who knows our deepest selves, who searches us out and knows us intimately, who will separate the wheat from the tares, the good from the evil.

I know that I like to see things in simple, right and wrong terms, and so do most of us, at least at times. But life is not that simple. We cannot root out the evil and save the good through some swift act of political surgery. This parable, I believe, stands as a rebuke to those who would tell us that the country can be saved if only we return to "family values", or if we have prayer in schools, or salute the flag and proclaim ourselves to be "one nation, under God."

Don't misunderstand me. The family needs to be strengthened, in whatever form it exists today. But Ozzie and Harriet aren't coming back, if indeed they ever existed. Fostering a prayerful life is the basis for spiritual health, in children as well as adults. But sixty seconds of enforced prayer in the classroom will not overcome a life of spiritual poverty outside it. Honoring our country is a way of building community and preserving ideals. But our ideals include a tolerance for difference and dissent.

So our prayer, then, needs to be for humility and discernment: humility that we might acknowledge our own brokenness, our capacity for evil, and our need for forgiveness and healing; discernment that we might see the world more clearly, and develop a greater appreciation for the complexity of

creation.

Finally, though, we can give thanks that the judgment is not ours to make. Let me illustrate. A few years ago, I was involved in a very sad death involving a baby. As the family faced the difficult decisions that arose, one family member really proved to be the rock, the one on whom the others depended. In conversations with her I learned that she had once worked at Children's, in fact had been a nurse on the very unit where all this was taking place. She understood the larger medical realities, and was very helpful in guiding the family through the crisis. And I very much appreciated her presence – she was a big help to me and to others.

But later, after the family had left, I was chatting with one of the floor nurses about the situation. She told me more of the story. She told me that this person actually had a very mixed history on the floor when she had worked there, and had made some irresponsible decisions that caused a lot of hurt among the staff. So, while she could appreciate how helpful this person had been during the crisis, she also knew that there was another side to her, and this awareness tempered her appreciation. So there it was - good and bad, mixed together in the same person. I was glad I hadn't known all this during the crisis; it might have clouded my relationship with this person. And I'm real glad that I didn't have to be the one to pass judgment on this person. For which side represented her true self? I'm glad it's God who will judge. My task is to live and work with the complexity of the human spirit.

As it is ours. I pray that, whenever we are confronted with the complex moral issues of the day, we will have the wisdom to resist the call of the sound bite. And I pray that we will have the courage to resist those who would recklessly attempt to separate the tares from the wheat. For we all stand in danger of judgment. The wheat and the tares grow within us. Therefore we are all in need of God's mercy.

Thanks be to God, who is the Lord of the Harvest, and who has sent us his Son, that we all might be made worthy to stand before him at the day of judgment.

AMEN