

Year A, Proper 16, 19th July 2026

Genesis 28: 10-19a. Romans 8: 12-25. Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43.

The good and the bad, the wheat and the weed, the saint and the sinner, suffering and glory, they're all in there in today's readings.

Which reminds us that the spiritual life a mishmash of apparent contradictions and paradoxes. For example

God is One and God is Three,
Jesus is fully Divine, Jesus is fully human
Creation is good, creation is broken
The Bible is God's word, the Bible was written by flawed human beings
To give is to receive
To serve is to reign
To forgive is to be forgiven
To be weak is to be strong
To die is to live
The kingdom of God is here, the kingdom of God is coming

As humans we mostly like things to be straightforward, and we want Christianity to provide us with that sense of if we do this then that will happen. Yet God refuses to be pummelled into giving us the certainty we crave – rather he almost insists we live with ambiguity.

Paradox is written into the very fabric of our faith, we have to hold together truths that on the face of it seem irreconcilable and counterintuitive. Yet those are the very things that give Christianity credibility, because they reflect the fact that the world we live in is full of contradictions and we need a faith that is robust enough and complex enough to cope with that.

What does embracing paradox mean for us? It means being comfortable with uncertainty and embracing the 'both/and' of life, the mystery, the in-between, rather than insisting on everything being black and white.

Just take our Genesis reading. Let's face it, would you want Jacob as your son or brother. A liar and a cheat, yet God chose him to be the Father of Israel. I suspect that most of us would think his behaviour would have automatically disqualified him from being the great Patriarch. And there are plenty more examples in the Bible like him – Moses the murderer for instance.

Yet the fact that God can see greatness in such flawed people should give us pause for thought, not least because it means that if God can use people like that, then he can also use people like us.

Many of the issues that have rocked Christianity down the centuries have emerged from our inability and unwillingness to sit with these sorts of contradictions and paradoxes. How can Jesus be fully human and fully divine? How can the God of all riches favour the poor? And so on and so on. Rather than live with uncertainty we choose one or the other.

It can be hard to say this is true – and this too is true when we don't understand how they can both be true at the same time. Yet that is what we are called to do in the parable of the wheat and the weeds – another story set in the agrarian culture that Jesus and his listeners would have been so familiar with.

The landowner plants uncontaminated wheat, but overnight weeds spring up among the wheat. Not surprisingly his servants ask him whether his seeds were as uncontaminated as he thought. But the farmer is clear as to the source of the weeds – an enemy.

Of course, in our gardens we generally regard the weeds as the enemy because we like everything well-ordered and pristine, so some of us, no names, spend hours and hours on our hands and knees in vain attempts to get rid them. In vain because they always return.

We think we know how to separate the weeds from the wheat. It's like give us a machete and we'll clear the field in no time. Let's get it done now. But Jesus says no, Jesus says wait. Why, because discerning what is wheat and what is weed is much harder than we think. We can't get rid of everything bad without damaging everything good.

Rushing ahead of God turns our sincerity into arrogance, our love into judgement. What we think is a young weed may, by God's grace, turn into super productive wheat, and what we think is wheat may fall by the wayside and turn into weed

Perhaps we should heed the wise words of the person who said weeds are just flowers in the wrong place and treat them as such. That seems to have been

the attitude of the farmer, who tells his servants to leave them there until harvest time when the reapers will separate the good from the bad.

Scholars, no doubt advised by horticulturalists, are confident that the weed in question was dandelion, or false wheat, which looks very like wheat when young and is poisonous. But when fully mature, they look very different as the ears of wheat droop, while the dandelion stays upright. To weed too soon would unnecessarily risk losing the good wheat along with the bad weed. So in farming terms the landowner's decision makes sense.

In the parable Jesus is asking us to sit with what seem to be two contradictions in tension with each other. Yes, evil is real, does harm and is among us. But, at the same time, Jesus suggests, our response should include both acknowledgement of that fact and, more to the point, restraint. In other words we have to wait.

As TS Eliot put it in his poem *The Four Quartets*
I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love for love would
be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith but the faith and the love and the
hope are all in the waiting.

And Paul makes the point in our Romans reading as well. He says creation is itself waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, while we, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for our adoption. And the passage ends But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

So waiting, in all its different aspects, is intrinsic to our faith. Intuitively, that feels wrong, especially when it comes to evil. After all, as Christians we're surely the good guys and, as God hates injustice and has an undoubted bias towards the poor and the oppressed, surely we should be doing our best right now to combat those evils we can almost see in front of our noses. But our presence in the world as Christians is not of some fully worked-out plan to get rid of evil at every turn.

As disciples it's hard enough living the Gospel, let alone being salt and light, asking us to act as judge and jury when it comes to judging sin and evil is waaaay above our pay grade.

These days many think using words like sin and evil are outdated and inappropriate and would prefer us to use a gentler vocabulary. Jesus isn't so squeamish. As far as he's concerned evil is real and is dangerous and should be recognised as such. Weeds were sown in that field by the enemy with the express intention of causing harm.

As it was in the field, good and evil side by side, so unfortunately it is with us, both individually and collectively. We may think we're the good guys and it's others who are the baddies, but in their eyes it may be the other way round. All of us are simultaneously saint and sinner. Those bad habits, those sharp words, the ignoring of the suffering of others, they come from somewhere else, they're not me. I'm kind and good and generous. But actually we can't always distinguish between good and bad. We think of forest fires as intrinsically bad but as Simon will tell you forest fires also bring renewal to the affected forest.

If these ambiguities, these paradoxes, worry us, we should perhaps reflect that they don't seem to worry God in the slightest. That means that, because we are planted in God's soil, we're safe – even in life's contradictions.

Much more important than the fact that evil is real and harmful is that ultimately evil is doomed. At harvest time I'll instruct my reapers to collect, bundle and burn the weeds, the landowner says. That sounds harsh, but if there is never going to be a making right for the downtrodden and the oppressed, then what *is* the Good News? Why bother with Christianity at all?

Jesus is saying in effect that justice is both necessary for an abundant harvest and certain because God wills it, even if, sadly, the weeds win out in our lifetime. All causes of evil, the causes we condemn in others, the causes we complacently ignore in ourselves, the causes we know about and the ones we won't will be burned up, not because God hates the world but because he loves it.