

Talk for 2020-07-19 (Trinity 6)

Romans 8: 12–25 and Matthew 13: 24–30, 36–43

I don't usually use two readings for these Third-Sunday services, but today's readings are so perfectly complementary that I wanted to bring them both into play. In them, we continue Paul's thoughts on the Christian life and Jesus's farming parables. We continue to look at how we can live good and holy lives when we're surrounded and thoroughly permeated by sinfulness.

And, despite the sometimes difficult and obscure language, this is all really good stuff – it's about day-to-day life as a disciple of Christ, a child of God. It's about how we reconcile these two parts of our experience: the holy and the sinful.

Last month, I talked about Paul's message that we don't belong to sin any more. In that passage, Paul said that we were in fact dead to sin through Jesus's own death, and that being dead meant we were no longer subject to the law: particularly the law that condemned us to be slaves to sin, owned and controlled by our master.

But also, of course, that we were alive again in Jesus's resurrection!

And in today's reading, again, Paul says, we're not slaves to the flesh (which is another word he uses for the rule of sin). Instead, he says that we belong to God – we are actually in God's debt because he's freed us from sin. But not only that: in fact, we're God's adopted children.

What Paul's doing here is putting our debt into context. We don't owe God in the way we might owe a bank – a debt that has to be repaid. No, we owe God in the way we owe a good parent.

This is a debt that can never be repaid, but also one that shouldn't be, isn't *expected to be* repaid. It's a debt incurred by virtue of the relationship between God the parent and us as God's adopted children.

So, by God's adoption of us as children, we're set free from sin. But much more than this, we're brought into an actual family, a good and true family. We're surrounded by love and support, with parents to learn from and follow, and siblings to be alongside.

And we're not even just adopted children. We're *heirs*, joint heirs with Christ. We have the same status in the Father's eyes as Jesus does!

If, *if*, we suffer with him. Being a child of God means sharing in Jesus's own sufferings – actually sharing them for God's sake, not just paying lip service.

And Creation itself is suffering, too. Indeed, Paul says that the Creation is pointless, frustrated, because of the separation of God's children from God – because of our sin. The whole of Creation can't achieve the goals God set because of *what we do*.

Then we have the wonderful feminine imagery of the Creation groaning with labour pains. Some of the worst pain known to humankind, related to some of the greatest joy. The Creation, like we ourselves, must suffer because we're frustrated, we're separated from our ultimate goal, our ultimate glory with God. And getting there is a process, a struggle, that we have to push through.

Fortunately, Paul says, these sufferings are nothing compared with the glory that will be revealed to us in the future. We don't see that glory now, we don't know what it will look like, but we hope and trust that it is coming.

And hope, Paul says, is always for what we can't see. If you see it, you don't need to hope. You can just reach out for it. But, for now, we wait in hope and patience for something we don't see yet.

Which is how we get to the gospel, because farming's all about hope and patience.

The farmer in Jesus' story plants seed in hope of a future crop, and has to wait patiently for it to grow and fruit.

But, as Mandy said last week about a different parable, this is a most unusual farmer. He doesn't weed his fields but prefer to let the weeds grow in amongst the crop. Every farmer, every gardener knows that's not the right and normal way to go about things. You root out all the weeds so that the good plants can prosper.

But the farmer doesn't want to harm a single one of the plants he's caring for. So much so that he is willing to see much of the crop fall short of its potential, to see some strangled by weeds, some weakened, some fail to produce any seed.

This is crucial. God could get rid of the weeds and allow some of the crop to flourish fully – but only at the cost of pulling up some other parts of the crop with the weeds. Better, in God's eyes, for all to survive than deliberately to harm some, even as collateral damage.

This is crucial to our understanding of the God revealed by and in Jesus. This is the God whose primary way of relating to their Creation is Love. A Love that is for the whole, but also for the individual.

God cares for the whole Creation and longs for it to flourish and reach the potential for which God designed it. But God also loves each part of the Creation and will not act to harm it.

The enemy has sown weeds in the field, Jesus says, and these weeds cause real harm to the crop, to God's Creation. Bad things happen to good people. People who should flourish are pulled down, misshapen, prevented from producing fruit.

Some plants still grow well, but not because they're better than the other plants. They grow simply because they escaped the clutches of the weeds that grew more thickly elsewhere.

God won't immediately stop the work of his enemy by pulling out the weeds, because God will not damage what God has created. And so the farmer lets the weeds flourish alongside the good crop.

But harvest *is* coming, Jesus says, and then the workers will swing into action. The weeds will be pulled out and burned up, destroyed completely. And the crop will be gathered in, the weak and the strong, the fruitful and the starved together.

And, with a swift change of imagery, the crop that grew in the field, nourished by earth and rain and sunshine, now becomes the Sun itself.

God is often compared to the Sun in the Bible. Jesus, too, is described as being like the Sun, indeed as being the Light of the World. But here,

Jesus Himself says that we, as God's *adopted* children, will also shine like the Sun in God's kingdom.

Just like Paul's talk of us being adopted children and fellow heirs with Christ, of our having the same status as Jesus in God's eyes, so here Jesus says that we will shine as He will.

Paul and Jesus are both here pointing to a deep truth. In the Kingdom of God, we won't be as we are now. We won't even be some cleaned up, perfected version of ourselves. We will be *transformed* to become like Jesus, like God Himself.

There's an old theological term for this ultimate destiny of God's children: deification. We won't *be* God, but will become truly *like* God. The image of God in which we are made will become real in us.

And this is in part why, as Paul says, we hope for a glory that we cannot see. Because we can't imagine, *I* can't imagine, what '*being like God*' would mean for me. I'm still too wrapped up in the weeds.

But, in God's Kingdom, we trust and hope that God's adopted children, God's honoured heirs, God's good crop, will shine out like the Sun.