

Sunday 19th July 2020
6th Sunday after Trinity (A)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Wisdom 12.13,16-19

NT: Romans 8.12-25

G: Matthew 13.24-30,36-43

If I had said to you a few months ago that I had seen two men in masks going into a bank, whilst another person – also wearing a mask – waited for them in a car outside, you would have been horrified and wondered how quickly the police arrived. Now if I say that same sentence about masked men entering a bank with a driver in the car outside you would probably nod sagely and say how good it was to hear and how sensible they were.

Context is everything, and our entire perception of the world is dependent on both context and experience. Even that first sentence about masked men going into a bank (by the way, I'm not precluding the fact that women can also be bank robbers) is dependent on our experience of larceny, either personal or reported. This raises the question of whether we can ever understand anything entirely independently, and whether anything is therefore absolute or whether it is only relative. This has often been an intellectual divide between some people of faith and the rest of the world. People of faith – of all religions – often like to see the world in terms of absolutes. This is at the heart of religious teaching on morality and ethics, where the less intellectually able end of the Christian spectrum try to create an absolute ethical teaching from some perceived authority, without realising that all morality in the world is relative. This is not, of course, saying that there is not an absolute morality in God, but merely that our perception is always marred by the relative concepts of context and experience. You can test this by arguing against yourself on just about any issue, from sexual ethics to the death penalty.

In the last few months there has been a lot of attention on the history of the slave trade and the complicity in this from individuals and institutions. We shall talk more about this at St Nick's over the coming months, but Christianity's murky past about slavery is not just about the 18th century slave-owning bishops, but also in the Bible. There are many references to slavery in the Bible – indeed there is one in our New Testament reading today, although it is in a different context from enslaved Africans – but the most disturbing is in Paul's letter to Philemon, where he wants the runaway slave to return to his master, but makes the intellectual excuse that slavery is bearable because he will be free in his life with Jesus, and both slave and master will be brothers. I do not mention this randomly, because context and experience allows us to see that Paul is making exactly the same argument in today's reading from Romans, in which he says, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." That is to say, our bond with Jesus means that the problems of the current time are not important. This, of course, is challenging in so many ways, and Paul's theology stops us confronting the reality of the wrongs of the world. If we see injustice, we should not say that it is a suffering which will pass, but we should fight to correct that injustice.

Context and experience are in fact at the heart of our Gospel reading today as well. It is known as the parable of the wheat and the tares – tares being a pleasingly archaic word for a wild plant. It is a straightforward parable: the good seeds sown are the children of the kingdom, and the bad seeds are the children of the evil one. You will have understood the general idea immediately, and then Jesus explained the meaning in detail. But it is difficult to read this parable without also thinking of the parable of the sower, which immediately precedes it in Matthew's Gospel and which we heard last Sunday. Today's parable cannot be read in isolation, and so we are immediately drawn to the difference, which is that the seed

in the parable of the sower refers to the hearers of the word, but they are influenced by their context (rocky ground, good soil etc), whereas in this parable the seed itself – the people - is seen to be good or bad.

This is your choice: do you want to judge on context or on absolutes? Today's parable of the wheat and the tares is much more unforgiving, because it suggests that some people are beyond redemption, whereas last week's parable suggests that the starting point is the same, and the result is a consequence of the context in which people find themselves. We are given two different models for understanding the human condition.

Rather like our masked men at the beginning, I find myself more attracted to the idea that God created with equality, but that context has caused difference. No one can absolutely be condemned, because the context of each of us is relative. Today's parable can only be seen as part of the same narrative as the earlier one and presents us with two different models for understanding humanity.

Some people find the idea of moral relativity and a contextual understanding of humanity both unnerving and confusing, which is why more fundamentalist religious practice will always flourish, because people like to hear certainties. But the immaturity of this is obvious, because we know that the world is complex and not simple. The shifting perceptions of the world which we can glimpse in the Christian attitude towards slavery reveal that complexity to us. What both parables reveal, though, is that there is an agent above humanity, and the agency of God is our certainty which does not rely on context. Just about everything else requires engagement and thought: the world is complex enough without being told what to think.

The last few months have demonstrated the shifting importance of context, as things previously understood as certainties are now open for debate. Every organization which held a risk register to manage and mitigate against possibilities have found that every risk has been exposed at once. This makes both parables seem very real, as we face the things we can control and the things we cannot. Finding God in our context at the moment is challenging, but when we look around we find the things which are constant, and that is where we find God in the midst of uncertainty. So ignore a faith which is issue-led and requires grandstanding, and find issues which are led by God. It is in the midst of changing context that we find certainty.

Fr Crispin Pailing