

19 July 2020

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Just before 08:00 on the morning of 26 December 2004 an earthquake of magnitude 9.2 occurred 30km beneath the seabed off the west coast of Northern Sumatra. Caused by a rupture between the Burmese and Indian continental plates, it was the third largest ever recorded, caused the whole planet to vibrate, and triggered earthquakes as far away as Alaska. The ensuing tsunami killed an estimated 228,000 people across 14 countries. Reckoned to be the worst natural disaster ever recorded, the Boxing Day tsunami led to a radical overhaul in disaster planning and provision globally, and for many a return to the age-old question of why God 'allows' such things to happen. For some, the answer is simple, if you believe there is no God, the question does not arise. But while absolving God of responsibility by disbelieving in his very existence might satisfy, if not comfort, a few, for the vast majority who explore their sense of God's presence in infinitely diverse ways, the question is a real and present one.

Jesus's parable of the wheat and the tares, or weeds, is the third of several in Chapter 13 of Matthew's Gospel using the imagery of sowing and baking. It is followed by the parable of mustard seed. The parable of the sower, which precedes it and appears in all the synoptic gospels, was delivered to a great crowd of people from a boat. But the next, which is today's gospel reading, appears only in Matthew, and may have been told only to the disciples as a lesson for mission and ministry. For while the overzealous follower of Jesus might feel empowered by his teaching to weed out the evil ones, the tares, amongst us, he invites us to consider more deeply who or what *are* the tares. Indeed, through this parable, he calls us to a deeper understanding of the very nature of creation.

I have never been comfortable with the notion of 'natural evil' of which the Boxing Day Tsunami is a powerful example. For one thing, by suggesting there is natural evil and human evil, it draws a line separating us from the rest of creation of which we are a part. In thinking about the tsunami, we might ask two questions: why did it happen, and why was its impact so severe for so many? Earthquakes happen because of movements in the earth's crust, especially along the junctions between continental plates. The gradual movement of these plates split South America from Africa 120 million years ago giving birth to the Atlantic Ocean. The movement of these plates is one of the rare features of our planet that make it a very special place, for geologists tell us that without it, life would not have evolved the complexity, diversity and beauty that it has. We wouldn't be here if our planet were not geologically active. Why was the impact of the Boxing Day Tsunami so severe? Well magnitude 9 is about as big as they get, but we know its effect was very much more severe on hard coastlines where people had removed the mangrove forests, than on soft coastlines where nature's protective shield was intact. As a consequence, after the tsunami, the Indonesian Government embarked on a huge programme of mangrove re-planting.

There is always more than one way to look at creation: through Man's eye, and through God's. Through Man's eye, the seed that fell on stony ground was wasted, but to God there was no waste as it fed the birds. Through man's eye, the tares are waste, to God, they are the Nitrogen fixers that replenish the soil. Is a bee selfish because its reason for pollinating flowers is to gain

nectar, or the flower selfish because pollination is its reason for providing nectar? When we focus only on the actors, we may lose sight of the story, that the bee and the flower are engaged in a relationship of mutual support. Might we start to sense God's wisdom in creation through this wider view? So, what of the wheat and the tares? In the same way that the bee and the flower are both self-interested and mutually supporting, God knows that for our very survival, every one of us must be both self-interested, mutually supporting, and supported by others in our human and ecological communities. Balance is everything. Unless we are indeed saints, like the earthquake, there is something of the wheat and the tare in every one of us. Jesus knows this, and so he tells us not to judge others lest we be judged. There is a paradox in true saintliness. It is this. The surest sign one is not a saint is to think we are, or put another way, if you think you're a saint, you probably ain't.

'God of love, when we expand our vision to see through your eyes, we find the wisdom in your creation. As we dare to dream a vision for a better world after Covid-19, give our eyes clarity enough to see, hearts big enough to love, and minds open enough to dream your dreams, that we might truly dare to do your will on earth as it is in heaven, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'