

**TRANSCRIPT OF A HOMILY PREACHED BY FR. JOHN GAYFORD AT ST. MARY'S EAST GRINSTEAD ON THE FOLLOWING GOSPEL FOR THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF YEAR A ON 20<sup>TH</sup> JULY 2008.**

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew 13:24-30

*Let them both grow till the harvest.*

Jesus put a parable before the crowds, 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. While everybody was asleep his enemy came, sowed darnel all among the wheat, and made off. When the new wheat sprouted and ripened, the darnel appeared as well. The owner's servants went to him and said, "Sir, was it not good seed that you sowed in your field? If so, where does the darnel come from?" "Some enemy has done this" he answered. And the servants said, "Do you want us to go and weed it out?" But he said, "No, because when you weed out the darnel you might pull up the wheat with it. Let them both grow till the harvest; and at harvest time I shall say to the reapers: First collect the darnel and tie it in bundles to be burnt, then gather the wheat into my barn."'

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

**The problem of evil and the devil.**

In today's Gospel of the wheat and the weeds we are confronted with two very difficult concepts. Evil and the Devil.

In this parable St. Matthew clearly associates the enemy who sowed the weeds in the wheat as the Devil. The existence of the Devil and all his minions makes the explanation of evil in the world much simpler.

Take the Devil away and you are fighting with some very difficult theological and philosophical concepts.

In a survey published this month (July 2008) in The Tablet of the beliefs of 1500 practising Roman Catholics, 63% believed in the existence of the Devil, 27% were not sure and 10% did not believe in his existence.

But as Adrian Hastings says in the Oxford Companion of Christian Thought, the Devil has a very complicated history. It is only in the later books of the Old Testament that he is personified. His best known appearance is in the Book of Job. The problem of a strong belief in the personified Devil is to produce a dualistic system of Religion that leads to heresies, many of them Gnostic: with two gods, one good and the other bad. The bad god may even be seen as the creator of the world with dominion over all things material. The good god is the god of the Spirit. The evil

power has trapped the spirit of human beings in a material world from which they need liberating if they are to have an eternal existence with God; so the heresy goes. Dualism has been popular mainly for its simplicity. Harry Potter is a dualism without God: it is projected as a fight between good and evil.

Let us go back to St. Matthew's Gospel. There is no doubt that the New Testament writer clearly accepted the concept of the Devil that he inherited through his Jewish faith. Modern Biblical scholars are at a lot of pains to point out that there is a difference between the Devil (Satan) and evil powers.

Charles Wesley was convinced of the Devil (Satan) stating "No Devil – no God". Pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic liturgy was full of exorcism, but the personified Devil is not in the forefront of Church teaching in either Anglican or Roman Catholic Churches today. The official teaching is that Christ broke the power of the Devil by his resurrection. Nevertheless evil still exists as we can all bear witness. Still there remains the mystery of evil.

This stands as a challenge to Christian theologians; and also is a stick with which philosophers can beat them.

How can we believe in an all-powerful God (Omnipotent) with all knowledge (Omniscient) who is absolute goodness: and yet evil is allowed to exist? When sin, suffering or death strike in personal terms in our lives our faith is challenged. When we see natural disasters such as earthquakes, flood and storms, to say nothing of witnessing the ugly side of nature all red in tooth and claw, we have some explaining to do which is beyond even the best minds.

The Bible attempted this in the Old Testament, first in the Myths as seen in Genesis, and then in the Wisdom literature which ends up by asking God questions to justify these events. We see this in the Psalms, and those who use them in a daily office will be familiar with this concept. The individual, the collective and the unknown all shout out: but they are shattered against the wall of the innocent victim.

Evil is irrational and unpredictable: and it needs good in order to corrupt and destroy. Evil is not willed by God.

But God gave all creation freedom for a purpose. We are not perfect, pampered puppets. All are a free agent, and that freedom goes as far as allowing destruction and suffering in all creation.

Retribution as a reaction does not heal or explain.

Iraenius in the second century put forward the idea that evil existed for us to fight against, to show that we are loyal subjects of God; a loving people in adversity, worthy of eternal life with him. God could eliminate evil but that would leave us as those pampered puppets with little value or integrity, not fully human and unworthy of sharing divinity. "God is powerful enough to eliminate evil, but too wise to do so".

Nevertheless the question can be asked: why does the maker resort to evil to school us? Alas, it seems that God may lose many in the process. Must the Divine healer hurt so to heal? Could we not have been made so that such a therapy was not needed? Are we so botched in the making that we need such rough handling?

God intends something better than human automatism. Freedom gives humanity its chief dignity: but also its chief peril, both individually and collectively.

Yet philosophers know that these mysteries provide them with a good wicket as all such theological concepts are imperfect and some lead into blind alleys. Despite the preceding discussion we are yet faced with an enigma, an enigma only a Divine intervention could solve.

We see that evil has no right to exist. We cry out to God against his permissiveness to evil. We join the Psalmist in saying "How long, O Lord?"

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In this we join Jesus on the Cross.

The Church teaches that Christ broke the power of the Devil on the Cross and the minions of darkness were scattered. This Divine intervention once for all provides an eternal answer to the presence of evil.

We believe that through Christ's suffering we can win redemption. That is why we relive this sacrifice in sacrament in the Mass. At the end of the day we may not explain the evil we might see in our own circumstances: but we can recognise and fight it. We pray as Jesus taught: "Deliver us from evil". It is not a theoretical philosophical problem but a practical reality.

Therefore we need to be skilled in recognition of evil in all its guises, so we may exorcise it in our lives where we can; and importantly so we can console and minister to its victims. The final Judgement is with God; and we pray also that we may find it in our hearts to pray as well for those whom we perceive as perpetrators of evil.