

Over these last couple of months we have been undertaking a restoration project in Howth Parish involving a replacement of the roof and other ancillary works. A couple of weeks ago the roof committee met with the contractor and he showed us the progress of the work. As he showed us around, the repair of some of the timbers, some of the work that would be undertaken on the stonework, he explained his basic philosophy as he approached work on any old building. The first step, he said, was to try and get yourself inside the mind of the person who had designed it and the person who had built it. Why they had done something this way and not that, even understanding why they might have made some of the mistakes apparent in the building.

Our Gospel passages last Sunday, this Sunday and next Sunday are all drawn from chapter 13 of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew groups together a whole series of parables in one block of teaching; this morning expanding on a parable in Mark's Gospel. As we reflect on this, I just want to apply our contractor's advice to ourselves as we reflect on this; that we try and get into the mind of the Gospel writer, of Jesus and his hearers.

Parables were very much part of the teaching method of Jesus as he took themes and images that would have struck a chord with his hearers. The Kingdom of heaven may be compared to , the Kingdom of heaven is like. The Kingdom of heaven would have struck a chord in contemporary Jewish spirituality. The hope that was expressed in this was not of a distant prospect, of 'pie in the sky when you die'. No, it is more immediate and upon this hope is built the certainty that God is Lord of this puzzling world; he will not always remain far off, but will reveal himself and make good his word.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' own public ministry begins with the proclamation of the nearness of the Kingdom, declaring, 'Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near.'

The parable we read today is of good seed sown in a field, only to be contaminated with bad seed. Any of us who have sown any sort of seed in a garden know only too well that agonising period as we watch for the signs of growth – is it the lettuce, the beans, the broccoli or is it the bindweed, the thistle or the dandelion that seem to thrive despite our best efforts? We all know the bramble that gets into the hedge or into the fruit bushes and we have to tolerate them co-existing together.

I go back to that fundamental Jewish certainty – that God is Lord of this puzzling world. In the preaching of Jesus, God breaks into this world in all its complexity and ambiguity. And he sends us, as he sent the first disciples, in all our complexity and ambiguity to be heralds, to be signs of the Kingdom, commanding them;

As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' ⁸ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. *Matt 10:7,8*

The writer of the Fourth Gospel tells us that on the night before he died, Jesus prayed with his disciples, prayed for his disciples:

¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. *John 17:15-18*

We are in the world and that is where we are called to remain - and the field is full of good plants and bad plants and that is the way it is to continue. The Gospel and our witness to the Gospel has to be worked out in the here and now. What we do need is discernment, what is the nature of the Kingdom we are called to embody in our life and witness?

Again, going back to the start of his public ministry; St Luke tells us of Jesus' appearance at the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth:

He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.

The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Luke 4:17-21

Good news to the poor, release to the captives, freedom for the oppressed.

The Kingdom of heaven has come near; come near in the preaching and ministry of Jesus, come near in the disciples sent out, in all their human imperfection, to teach and to heal, come near in Christians in all ages standing firm in the face of racism, of oppression and exploitation, of poverty and injustice.

In recent times in the face of international terrorism, of mass migration we have seen societies turning in on themselves and we have seen a style of politics that feeds on that, that fosters that. With that we have seen the growing phenomenon of 'Fake News', stories known to be false spread through social media with the sole aim of discrediting political opponents or groups in society. We have seen a growing development of people only accessing the news through social media in which they are fed stories in line with preferences they are known to hold. We have seen dangerous signs of fragmentation in societies across the world in which the different, the other is

viewed with suspicion and resentment and the different and the other are targeted in racial and sectarian attacks on individuals and communities.

These are nothing less than weeds sown in the field of our social and political life and need to be named as such. I recall in the early days of the peace process in Northern Ireland attending a meeting of the Ballymena Clerical Society. We had invited a number of the politicians of the different parties to come and speak to us. On this occasion we had invited David Alderdyce, then leader of the Alliance Party, who had himself grown up in a Presbyterian Manse in Ballymena. We asked him what he saw as the role of the Churches in the Peace Process. His reply was simple. ‘Too often’, he said, ‘the Churches have acted as chaplains to the tribes instead of the prophet declaring the sometimes unpopular ‘Thus says the Lord.’

The Kingdom of heaven is near; in our streets, in our communities, in our society, in our world; also present are those darker forces that would foster division, that would foster values of suspicion, of racism and sectarianism and all in the name of protecting our society. We cannot eradicate them. We can, in the name of Christ, name them for what they are.

St Paul, in writing to the Galatians says;

²² the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit *Galatians 5:19-25*