

Light in Dark Places

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Published in the Ministry District of Yorke Peninsula

Sunday, July 23, 2023

It was a small child who said that “Faith is believing in things that you know are not true”. It is an interesting take on things, but perhaps it would be better put that “Faith is believing in things that your eyes cannot confirm. Things that are not supported by the evidence”. Rather than declaring that seeing is believing, it is better to say that not seeing is believing, because faith calls us to step out of our comfort zone. This is always a challenge because God essentially asks us to trust him. Faith is not built on the evidence of our eyes, but rather upon the evidence of our understanding of who God is – Faith is not knowing the future, but knowing who it is who takes us into the future. Thus, it is not speaking of a set of facts or knowledge, but of a relationship with God. My faith comes because I have on my journey come to an understanding about the fidelity of God – the one who can be trusted. This perhaps is the most important thing for us as God’s people, to learn to trust in the faithfulness of God. For example, prayer only becomes a meaningful activity, if we have developed an understanding that God answers prayer. Much of our first reading speaks of who God is – his character and it is our understanding of the character of God that determines how we will act as his people.

Faith calls us to step back from the world as we experience it, and to bring God into the equation. To look at the impossible and to repeat the words of Mary, saying nothing is impossible for God. Do we believe this, or are we hesitant? This means that we need to take the risk and to trust God. But is this a risk? Perhaps the real risk is not about trusting God but trying to trust in ourselves. Trying to use our own abilities. It is as we look at the world, that we can sometimes wonder why God is allowing things to be like they are. Why does God permit the likes of Putin or Osama bin Laden or Saddam Hussein or Hitler and Stalin? In fact, in nearly every generation, we see the rise of these evil people who frankly put, it seems that the world could do without. With recent atrocities in the world, there is at least space to ask the question, “Why do you allow this to happen, Lord?”

It is in answer to this question that we find Jesus telling the parable that forms the opening of today’s Gospel the story of the Wheat and the Weeds or the Tares as it is put in some translations. According to the parable, the destruction of the Tares is delayed, not because of any merit in themselves but because of the fact that their destruction, may put at risk the harvest. Tares were a weed that was similar to Wheat in the way it grew, but that it did not produce a crop. As Jesus spoke of the fruitfulness of the good soil last week, here it is the fruitfulness that will set things apart. At the harvest, those who produce the goods will receive their reward and those unfruitful their reward of destruction.

The parable for us is a challenge as it talks to us of the omnipresence of God. The parable tells us that even in the harvest field there is going to be weeds. Evil, or worthless individuals will be in midst of the faithful. This is how the enemy - the devil - works. Fear not it says, they will receive their final reward, as will the righteous, but it is for the sake of the righteous that they will be allowed to continue.

Now this is hard stuff to understand, that God will allow evil to continue rather than remove it. Evil - is not the biggest danger to the faithful, rather it is the removal of evil which in itself may be damaging. Now I am not sure I fully understand what this is about, in my mind - If Hitler had died as a child, surely the world would have been a better place?

Simply put, the answer is I don't know, but the parable that Jesus tells, assures me that God is in control. Even when the circumstances seem to indicate the opposite. But this is rather academic. Let us think about this in practical terms.

First of course, there is the sense that not all is right in the kingdom. Only at the end of time will these things be sorted out. The church will have those working for the evil one rather than God. I can give you a list if you like?? Well perhaps not, as it is more likely to reveal my prejudices than absolute truth. We all know the people who are seemingly working against the kingdom - yet it is easy to brand them as evil - and yet overlook the more subtle distractions that turn us from the task. Everyone has the potential to be a child of light or of darkness. As such, we must take the risk that they are a child of light and seek to build their faith and if they turn out to be Tares, to allow God to deal with them.

There are many stories in history about groups which have taken an exclusivist view of religion. There are the Exclusive Brethren (or the Amish) as obvious examples of pursuing an isolationist policy, but there are more dangerous things than that. In the past few decades, there is an increasing desire amongst some Christians to find the perfect church. There are Christians, who move from church to church, and many will leave and move on because they believe that there is evil or sin in the place. One wonders if they understand this parable. Perhaps more of a problem is the rise of the Christian School and Home Schooling. I am all for the protection of children from evil, but the isolation of a Christian's children from the world is dangerous. First, they need to enter the world at some stage, and second, not all kids from Christian Schools are angels.

But I think this is more than just a word for us about church. The harvest field more often refers to the world than the church in the Gospels, and there is a very real sense that in the world there is this mixture of Good and Evil. In our daily walk, we will experience both. In as much as there are children of darkness in the church, there are children of light in seemingly evil places.

This informs us about mission. Now I am not suggesting that we all trot off to the red-light districts of Kings Cross or St Kilda, but rather, that as we walk on this journey of life, that we are aware, that we may have the opportunity to find good even in the bad places.

Rather than focusing on the evil, perhaps we would better serve God by looking for the light in the dark places. God is everywhere - God is therefore here and at the pub, the casino, and the racetrack - This is what Omnipresence means. Do not get me wrong, there are places where God weeps, but nevertheless he is there. As Jesus hands and feet, we can be there also, bringing the message of salvation to those who are perishing.

Let us then be encouraged to take God's light into the dark (and hopeless) places.

AMEN