**Reflection for Sixth Sunday after Trinity – 19 July 2020**

*If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?*

 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelag*o

“Do you ever feel like we’re living during a particularly bad period in history?” – asks one character of another in a comedy on Sky TV this week that’s set in the so-called Dark Ages.

I haven’t seen the programme, but saw the quote in a newspaper review – doubtless chosen because it resonates so much with what we are currently living through. At the moment, every day can feel like a particularly bad day in history across the entire world.

With global anxiety running at such a high level there are few people who feel positive or cheerful about what the future holds. Who now would disagree with Saint Paul’s view of the sufferings of the present time? The whole creation is groaning in labour pains and we too groan inwardly, while we wait for God’s Kingdom to come here on earth as in heaven.

We are also witnessing much outward groaning too, which is hardly surprising, along with doubts about a God who allows the world to be such a mess. If God is in charge, shouldn’t his Kingdom be perfect – nothing bad or evil, only good and righteous.

We’ve been asking the same questions since the beginning of time, as the slaves do in the parable Jesus uses to teach us about God’s Kingdom in Matthew’s Gospel.

Jesus addresses those who believe there are two kinds of people in the world - the wheat and the weeds - the good and the bad, the righteous and the evil. Nothing controversial about that, surely?

Well, the danger lies in assuming we are the wheat – the good and righteous; and that we know who the weeds are – the bad and evil. And then, once we know who the bad people are, it’s all too easy to go a step further and think it’s our job to rid the world of the weeds.

To all this God says No.

Against the never-ending temptation to see the world in terms of ‘Them’ and ‘Us’, we need to recognise there really aren’t just two kinds of people in the world; and instead admit there are two kinds of people in each of us – saint and sinner simultaneously all the time.

Life is complicated; we are complicated. Just as those who have faced or witnessed evil head on have acknowledged. The writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who was a political prisoner in a Soviet forced labour camp, wrote *after* his experience of the impossibility of separating out evil people, because the dividing line between good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. Who, he asks, is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?

Solzhenitsyn’s plea echoes the opening verses of today’s Psalm 86 in recognising our divided heart, the good and the evil we are each capable of. The Psalmist longs for a united heart, one knitted to the Lord, so that we may walk in God’s truth.

Instead of busying ourselves trying to separate the wheat from the weeds, the good from the bad, and destroying a piece of our own heart along the way; instead of worrying about who is righteous and who is evil - our walk in God’s truth allows us to focus on the work we have been called to do in proclaiming and living in the Kingdom of God.

Don’t worry about the weeds, just spread the seeds of God’s love in word and deed and trust God with the outcome, knowing He judges with a mildness and great forbearance way beyond our capability. God allows good and evil to co-exist in his Kingdom and in each of us whether we like it or not, approve of it or understand it. We are called to tolerate this situation wherever we encounter it: ‘Do not resist an evildoer’ Jesus says earlier in Matthew’s Gospel.

‘Don’t resist’ and ‘tolerate’ sound passive but are the opposite and involve considerable activity on our part. Jesus says: **Love** your enemies and **pray** for those who persecute you; **forgive** those who sin against you, as you have been forgiven.

Loving, praying for and forgiving those we dislike, disagree with or believe are pawns of the evil one is difficult. Loving our neighbour as a general concept is easy to agree with, but far harder to put into practice on an individual level – particularly face to face.

Then, we need the wisdom of humility to recognise that being hurt or offended by what someone says or does is a choice we have; as is preferring to be right (or seen to be right) rather than reconciled over a difference of opinion or action.

We can choose to be offended, hurt or convinced we are right and allow this to fester into bitterness in our heart OR we can love and forgive, just as we are loved and forgiven by our heavenly Father. We are sinners living among sinners. We who hope to receive God’s grace must be willing to extend it.

When we are able to love and forgive everyone else based on what God has done for us, not on what others have done to us, then we can be truly magnanimous – be gracious, full of compassion, slow to anger and full of kindness; just as our Father is to us.

In God’s Kingdom, it’s not for us to devote our time and energy on the destruction of weeds as we perceive them, or purifying the world of evil as we think necessary. Any violence used to spread the Gospel does violence to the Gospel. Our job is simply the daily and repeated practice of ‘unfailing love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins.’

*O God, save us from ourselves,
from double standards,
and divided hearts,
and give us light and life
in Jesus Christ our Lord*. *Amen*