

Sunday 20 July 2008: The Ninth Sunday after Trinity

Messy uncertainty

Readings: Romans 8:18-25; Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait.

But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest'.

“God does not play dice” said Albert Einstein. It was the 1920s, and the debate in the physics community was about the emerging world of quantum mechanics. Up until then, the universe had supposedly conformed to the laws described by Isaac Newton, but at the very extremes of nature, these laws broke down. In the world of sub-atomic particles, explaining or predicting the nature of their behaviour became more a matter of probability than certainty. At the microphysical level, it appeared experimentally impossible to determine a particle’s position and momentum simultaneously, and the more precisely you determined one measurement, the more imprecise the other became. And very fact of performing the experiment itself affected the data. Such observations became enshrined in the world of quantum theory by Werner Heisenberg in his “Uncertainty principle”. Einstein’s objections to these developments were as much philosophical as there were based on scientific evidence. In a Europe still scarred by the First World War, the need for certainty at least in the physical universe and in its creator perhaps was a cry of the heart “God does not play dice”, said Einstein.

In the world of the moral universe, as well as the physical, while our spirits might groan inwardly for certainty, it’s not that easy to find. We long to plant good seed but find all too often that weeds spring up and thwart our best intentions. Or worse still we find it difficult to determine the weeds from the wheat we long to harvest. The moral universe as well as the physical one becomes a place of messy uncertainty, or even messy compromise.

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As teenager, in general studies classes, with the arrogance and naivety of youth, I remember vividly trying to convince myself that on ethical issues as in other subjects, the inability to decide what is right or wrong was about ignorance. Get enough information on the issue, be it abortion or euthanasia, and you could come to a logical, irrefutable position about it, or so I thought. Sadly I can’t claim I’ve become any less arrogant or naïve with age, but I have come to realise that the world of ethical choices and human relationships is not as simple as that. And the experience of making difficult choices or simply knowing others who are going through those things can often change even our most certain or entrenched perspectives. Just like the world of physics, being part of the experiment changes the data itself – we become part of the messy uncertainty and messy compromise.

And even when we know with something akin to certainty what is right, being able to make it happen is not that simple. Most of us have looked on with horror and despair at the violence

and injustice being perpetrated on the people of Zimbabwe. It's hard to find anyone who doesn't think Zimbabwe would be a better place without Robert Mugabe at the helm. But how to achieve that is a different matter. Was Morgan Tsvangarai right not to contest the second round of elections or should he have risked even greater violence and gone ahead? Even at this distance you could sense the inward groaning of Tsvangarai and others as they tried to come to that impossible decision. Should the UN try again to impose sanctions? Would they achieve an end, or would their impact in effect mean pulling up the wheat as well as the weeds, hitting those least able to cope with further deprivation? Inside and outside Zimbabwe, there are those who are not sure. And in the end, it may be that the solution is one of messy political compromise, even though our deepest groaning and longing is that it may be otherwise. For the recent experience of Iraq tells us that even when the removal of a dictator appears, at least in military terms, clean cut and final, the messy uncertainty of its aftermath is persistent and takes patient and determined living with and working through.

Now, where you might ask, is the good news of Jesus Christ in any of this? If all I'm doing is shrugging my shoulders and saying "that's how it is, folks", then it's no wonder that some of those on the conservative wing of the church think that those of a more liberal persuasion have no doctrine, and no alternative view to present to a world in need, have no good news in reality.

Well I don't think I'm shrugging my shoulders, I don't think I'm accepting things as they are. In the gathering up of all things in Christ, I believe we will see clearly enough to recognise the wheat and the weeds for what they are, but that sometimes day by day they can be mighty hard to distinguish. And the problem with too certain a belief is that in our zealous pursuit of what we perceive as the weeds it's all too easy to do untold damage to the tender shoots of wheat that lie unrecognised or unheeded among them.

Actually experiencing faith as a tentative yet compelling journey through the messy uncertainties messy compromises that life is, is I believe good news indeed. For me the heart of the good news of Jesus Christ is a God who does not stand aside from the messy uncertainties of life but walks with us through them. In fulfilling the redemption, for which Paul tells us all creation groans, God might have done it the certain, clean-cut and easy way, but instead chose to live among us in human flesh and blood and know the joys and the fears and doubts of all that entails. In confronting evil, Jesus might have called an army of angels to his side to claim the certainty of victory, but instead enters the messy compromise of human power games, and nailed to a cross, the God who Einstein hoped does not play dice, looks on as soldiers cast lots for his clothing. This God might have announced his victory over death in the palaces of kings, but instead chose the quiet of dawn and the unreliable witness of women. And perhaps most amazingly of all, God chose to entrust this good news then and now to all too fallible and compromised group of followers. Thus God looked into the heart of his followers then and each one of us now, and sees the weeds and wheat, sees the greatest faults which are so often the mirror image of our greatest strengths, sees our longing for wholeness even in our brokenness and chose not to write us off but to let us grow weeds and all in the field of discipleship. Faith is not a matter of certainty of doctrine, or even of belief in Jesus. It's about living his passion and resurrection in the messy and uncertain places of daily life. For most of us, that's unlikely to be about heroic deeds, but more often about living through our failures and small successes; about uneasy compromises and often unrecognised acts of courage and faithfulness; about carrying one another's burdens, and doing the small, ordinary things of human relationships with care and concern. About learning to live with uncertainty and our inability to express or to fulfil our deepest yearnings and longings; and in all that recognising the work of the Spirit in us and among us, groaning with us, longing with

us and in the depths of all creation waiting with us, praying and eagerly longing for the Kingdom that is and is to come.

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