

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 23 July 2017 – Year A
Genesis 28.19-19a; Rom.8.12-25; Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

Earth connected with heaven

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. With hindsight, would Theresa May have called the recent general election? Surely not. With hindsight, would I have attempted to make what looked like a simple repair to my fridge but which turned into one of the little DIY disasters to which those of us of a not very practical disposition are prone? No: I'd have called an engineer. If Jacob had known how bitterly Esau resented him, would he have cheated his twin brother out of his birthright? If he hadn't, much of the Bible would have to be rewritten. Any of us can think of examples where with hindsight we would not have said or done what we did. Being wise after the event is easy. But you can't put the split milk back in the bottle. Except in films run backwards.

When Jacob lay down to sleep under the stars he was, to put it mildly, in a state. Because he has deceived Esau out of the family inheritance his father Isaac has sent him away to a distant uncle. Suppose even now Esau is pursuing him. He's a hunter, after all, and he's vowed to kill his younger twin. That's how Jacob comes to be on the road. God is not in his thoughts at all, only how to save his life. Any one of us would feel the same. He dreams of a ladder stretching between earth and heaven and when he wakes he calls the place Bethel, which means the house of God, saying 'Surely the Lord was in this place and I knew it not'. It's usually the other way round. We go to church hoping to catch a glimpse, a whisper, a hint of the divine. Often we return disappointed, though sometimes surprised. Thanks to Drs Freud and Jung we have learnt to interpret at least some of our dreams. As Jacob drifts off you'd expect an anxiety dream, a nightmare in which Esau is bearing down on him, ready to strike. Instead, his dream provides a psychological boost for continuing his journey and in due course, after another, more disturbing dream of wrestling with a stranger, he will be reconciled with his brother.

There are lots of dreams in the Bible. A little later in the narrative, we come to those of Jacob's son Joseph which got him into such trouble with his brothers – a pretty

dysfunctional family, this one. In Egypt, Joseph acquires fame as an interpreter of other people's dreams – first those of his fellow-prisoners, then Pharaoh's, a skill which first saves his skin then brings him undreamed of political power. But Jacob's dream of the ladder has no interpretation other than the one God gives during it, as he speaks words of assurance, that the promise he made to Jacob's grandfather Abraham, of descendants who would become a great nation, will be fulfilled through him. Not a word about cheating and deception. The moment of crisis in family relations has turned into the moment of revelation of a much wider picture, as yet unfinished, though its main lines have been drawn. I've got to the age when I'm not as confident as I once was up a ladder. But I do know how useful they are for enabling us to reach places which we otherwise could not. What I especially like about the ladder in the dream is how it connects the earthly with the heavenly, the world on which our feet stand with a realm which seems completely separated from it, so much so that for many people it's merely a figment of the imagination. Jacob doesn't himself climb the ladder, but he sees it, and it tells him that though he is fleeing in fear of what may happen to him, God's purpose is working itself out: 'Surely the Lord was in this place and I knew it not'.

What does this tell us? Two important things. First, that when we're in a pickle, as Jacob was, our minds completely taken up with the worries of the moment, God may not be as absent or irrelevant as we think. I don't know about you, but I find faith much easier when everything is as it should be, and much harder when it feels as though everything is conspiring against me. Fair-weather faith like that needs toughening up if it is to grow to maturity. And second, though we may not sense God's presence when we are beset with troubles, it may make itself known to us in their very midst. There's a biblical pattern here. For some older interpreters of the Bible, the story foreshadowed the way Jesus embraces suffering and death at the hands of his fellow-humans yet breaks the bonds of death to demonstrate the absolute supremacy of divine love over every form of hatred and violence. Every dream his followers cherished of life worth living is shattered on the Cross, only for Christ to return to them and with him, faith in God's larger purpose rekindled. The disciples

could have echoed Jacob's words when Easter dawned and they looked back to the agony of the Cross: 'Surely the Lord was in this place and we knew it not'.

Ladders connect, enable us to reach places we otherwise could not. But I looked in vain for any kind of connection between Jacob's dream and the parable of the wheat and tares in Matthew 13 – until I remembered an icon I'd seen at an exhibition in London a few years ago. Painted around 600 and in St Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, it shows a ladder stretching between earth and heaven and a long procession of monks climbing it. But instead of angels there are devils with pitchforks and bows and arrows, trying with some success to push monks off so that they fall into the fires of hell below, just like the tares in the parable. You can imagine looking at that day by day if you were a monk and wondering if your footing was secure or if you were in danger of tumbling down to eternal punishment.

Those of us of a certain age remember cornfields full of poppies, corncockle and cornflowers when you were young, and how beautiful they looked. But from the farmer's perspective they are a nuisance, because they reduce the crop and need to be separated from it at harvest. Tares are probably darnel, which looks like wheat and is hard to distinguish from it as it grows. We all know about weeds. I spend hours every year pulling up hundreds of seedlings from two large sycamore trees on either side of my garden. If I didn't, it would quickly turn into a forest of saplings, with brambles and ivy thrown in for good measure. However hard I try to remove them all, some always escape my attention and become harder and harder to pull up. So here's the farmer fretting as he looks at his crop, thinking that if he tries to eradicate the darnel some of the wheat will come up with it. Best leave it until harvest, when they can be properly sorted out.

So far so good. This is the second agricultural parable in the chapter, following the more familiar sower and his seed, and Matthew has Jesus give each of them a private explanation to his disciples. And therein lies the problem for us, because just as the parable of the wheat and tares ends with the weeds being gathered and burnt, so the explanation tells us that at the final reaping, evildoers will be cast into the furnace and the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. That makes us feel uncomfortable, and so it should. At the simple level of the farmer, burning the

weeds is appropriate and they may even serve some useful purpose as fuel. Are we supposed to believe that at the Last Judgement people will be consigned to heaven or hell? The problem for me is that the explanation put into the mouth of Jesus contradicts the main point of the parable, which is that we shouldn't rush to make judgements about who is good and who isn't. Wait, says Jesus; leave that kind of judgement to God. And notice that the image of fire is used of both good and evil: the latter are cast into the furnace, the former shine like the sun.

Despite this, there has always existed a tendency in the Church to identify rogue elements and purify itself of them. Here's a bit of local history. On Friday 13 November 1002 King Aethelred the Unready (that is, not unprepared, but ill-advised) ordered all Danish men in England to be killed. In Oxford they were brutally slaughtered in St Frideswide's Church, now the site of Christ Church Cathedral. Later, Aethelred, echoing the parable, justified this as a need to kill 'all the Danes who had sprung up in this island, sprouting like cockle [corncockle] among the wheat'. When St John's College was excavating the land for new student accommodation in 2008 a mass grave of more than thirty young men was discovered, including bones which had been burnt – maybe in that same massacre. But wiser counsels in Christian history have used this parable more positively, to urge caution when some voices clamour for heretics and other misfits to be excommunicated or, worse still, punished by death. And since we're five hundred years on from Luther's 95 theses, here's what the Reformer had to say in a sermon about this parable about the need for tolerance in his own time:

From this observe what raging and furious people we have been these many years, in that we desired to force others to believe; the Turks with the sword, heretics with fire, the Jews with death, and thus outroot the tares by our own power, as if we were the ones who could reign over hearts and spirits, and make them pious and right, which God's Word alone must do. But by murder we separate the people from the Word, so that it cannot possibly work upon them and we bring thus, with one stroke a double murder upon ourselves, as far as it lies in our power, namely, in that we murder the body for time and the soul for eternity,

and afterwards say we did God a service by our actions, and wish to merit something special in heaven.

Concern for religious truth should never be a pretext for murder. It is not for us to determine who possesses it and who doesn't; that is God's business. In any case, Luther says, by acting in this way we actually interfere with his purpose, since at some future point they may come to a better understanding of his way.

I'm sure we can all agree with such sentiments. Breathing hellfire and damnation or even hinting at it is a form of arrogance born of insecurity, in that it assumes humans are privy to God's will. Better, perhaps, to approaching the parable in a way which is more in line with Jacob's dream, and see that the distinction between the wheat and the tares is found within each one of us. Our selves are divided, and even our best intentions and finest actions may, as Luther so clearly recognised, be laced with self-interest. So it's not just the world at large that's like the field with its mixture of wheat and weeds – it's each one of us too. Our first work is not to judge the evil others do, but to deal with the conflicts within ourselves. Hatred and envy and greed can grow unrecognised and their harvest is a bitter one. We need the gift of grace, God's loving power which can lift the self out of its bondage to them and help us to root them out. For in the life of heaven such bitter growth can have no place, and must in the end be wholly consumed in the fire of God's love.

A dream of a ladder; a field growing to harvest: earth connected with heaven, and human life, individually and in community, a mix of plants which nourish and those which do not. This is a world we know. These stories, like the best icons, are windows on to truths deeper than those which inhabit the surface of our minds, truths to set us free: 'Surely the Lord was in this place, and I knew it not'.