

Patience and Hope

A sermon preached by Lay Minister Dr Tony Lemon at St Peter's on Sunday 19 July 2020
Ref: Romans 8, 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

It is now four months since Britain entered what we quickly came to know as lockdown, in an attempt to manage and control the spread of the coronavirus. This experience has caused much self-searching, both individually and collectively, as we have examined our reactions to the restrictions on our normal lives, reflected on what we may be learning and whether any long-term changes may issue from those lessons. It has been a period that has demanded *patience* from everyone. As we have tried to exercise patience, *hope* has been very central to our day-to-day existence: hope that the restrictions will succeed in bringing the virus under control; hope for those who are seriously ill; hope for health workers, care workers and all those at risk; hope for the success of the many research efforts seeking to find a vaccine; hope that relaxation of restrictions will not lead to a second wave of the pandemic.

It is appropriate, then, that our readings today speak of these themes of patience and hope. In our Epistle Paul tells us that 'in hope we were saved....if we hope for what we do not see we wait for it with patience'. There is a clear message in these words that hope and patience are qualities that reinforce one another. Our hope for what we do not see helps us to develop patience as we wait. Equally, that patience makes our hope stronger.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds is about waiting – something we all find difficult. The farmer waits for the harvest-time, watching in frustration as the weeds grow alongside his wheat. But he knows that to rush in and pull up the weeds, as his servants wanted, would pull up much of the crop with them. Unusually, when the disciples ask Jesus to explain this parable, he does so very clearly: the farmer who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, the devil who sowed them; the harvest is the end of the age. So Jesus is trying to explain to his followers what God's kingdom is like. They were impatient: if the kingdom was really present where Jesus was, coming to birth in what he was doing, they wanted the whole thing at once. Their timetable was full speed ahead. It may well be that Jesus had his eye on the revolutionary groups of the day, who were only too ready to step into God's field and root up what looked like weeds. There were many groups, including some of the Pharisees, who were eager to fight against pagans and against compromised Jews. But Jesus is trying to teach people patience – the patience of God himself, who does not work to a human timetable, and who does not want to declare harvest-time too soon, destroying wheat along with the weeds.

When dramatic and tragic events occur, there is always pressure on governments for instant changes of policy and legislation. But politicians of stature know that legislation rushed through Parliament in such circumstances seldom proves wise and enduring – often it has unanticipated results, pulling up wheat with the weeds. Royal Commissions are castigated for the time that they take, but, provided that they are not just an excuse for inaction, it is generally right to give the issues concerned the full examination that they deserve. For the church too, as it is caught up in difficult issues and demands for reform, there is an ongoing tension between what many perceive as an urgent need for change and the need to get things right and recognise the wider implications of fundamental changes. In the case of the Anglican Communion these implications are not just national but global.

At the heart of this parable of the wheat and the weeds is *patience* – the patience of God himself. We may be sure that God doesn't enjoy the sight of a blemished world – a cornfield with weeds all over the place. But nor does he relish the thought of declaring harvest-time too soon, and destroying wheat along with the weeds. Many Jews in Jesus' time recognised this, and spoke of God's compassion, delaying his judgement so that more people could be saved in the end. John Wesley preached the perfectibility of man – no one is irredeemably lost in God's eyes. And here we can learn from Jacob's dream in our Old Testament reading – the dream of that ladder to heaven. Jacob has every reason to be apprehensive about his situation. He has lied to his father, taken God's name in vain, and made Esau want to kill him. And yet Jacob is not discarded: he is not a weed to be pulled up, but he remains a tool God can work with. The dream gives Jacob a message of encouragement: all is not lost, God still has a purpose for him, just as later he was to have a purpose for Peter who, for all his flaws, was to be the rock on which God's church would be built, and for Paul, the persecutor of Christians, who was to be one who would lead the mission of the embryonic Christian church. There is a clear sense in all these instances that, in the words of today's Psalm (139), 'God is everywhere that we are, and knows all our thoughts'. We may appear to be weeds, but we all have the potential to become wheat. God has the patience to wait for change.

It is our human nature to focus on the specific and the immediate, but God's perspective is not limited in time and place. We have all heard people bemoaning particular ills and suffering in the world and asking 'Why doesn't God *do* something?' The answer rests in the fact that we are made with free will to act and decide as we see fit – and of course so much of the world's suffering arises from human actions. But even when the evils seem clear, the way forward may be much less so. Take for instance the extreme case of North Korea, with its brutally repressive dictatorship and long-suffering people. Much as we should like to bring them relief, the huge dangers posed by military intervention, especially for the people of South Korea, dictate a patient, nuanced strategy. As Christians we are certainly called to pray for and actively seek justice in the world around us – locally, nationally and globally – and sometimes there may be immediate steps that we can take. But in relation to many situations we must frame our hopes and prayers not in terms of the specific solutions that we may favour, but in ways that recognise the patience and purposes of God himself. In the words of that wonderfully simple prayer, we must seek to change the things we can, accept the things we cannot change, and ask for wisdom to know the difference. As we pray for guidance in difficult situations, for moral and spiritual strength to live our lives courageously, our prayer emanates from a recognition of our own limitations. Often we may find ourselves fumbling for the right words, but the Spirit, acting within us, will articulate our prayers and bring them to God. Always we must live in hope, and in doing so develop a patience that strengthens our hope.

Amen