

Leave the Weeding to God

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 19 July, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr David Gill

Pentecost 7A

**Contemporary Reading: excerpt from ‘*The Dawn is at Hand*’
by Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker); Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

When the world’s Roman Catholic bishops gathered at the Second Vatican Council, one of them posed a question that still resonates, over half a century later. “*What have we done to the church,*” he asked, “*that makes people not want to belong to it?*”

That’s a good question. But let me suggest an even better one. It’s this: what have we done to the Christian faith that makes people not want to embrace it?

Disbelief is not new, of course. The gospel reading we’ve just heard – the parable of the weeds – suggests that Jesus and his friends puzzled over the mixed reactions they were getting, even then. The early church worried about the same question. It is not only recently that people have been ambivalent about the Christian faith. People have always been ambivalent.

Yet the situation we face today is in some ways rather special. I’m not thinking only of those who find our truth claims preposterous. Or of what census figures keep telling us about the state of our churches. I’m thinking of the hostility, even anger, I see in some people’s eyes when I say that, yes, I am a believer, I am a Christian.

Why? Why that anger? To what extent – and this is what we need to be reflecting on – to what extent may we Christians be the cause of the anger? What have we done to the Christian faith that makes people not want to embrace it?

Partly, of course, it’s the spiritual climate of the day, which does not leave a lot of space for wondering, marveling, worshipping.

Partly, it’s the burden of our Christian history and our oh so entrenched divisions.

Partly, it is the sight of our faith, like others, being exploited to serve particular political ends. If we didn’t know it before, we surely know it now: religion is not necessarily a virtue or a blessing. It can also be a curse.

And partly, it’s because people have lost the art of respectful disagreement. Our culture has a problem with the way we talk to each other. Christians are victims of that problem. And we’re also contributors to it of course.

All of these factors, plus whatever scandals are in the air at any particular time, help to generate a negative, even hostile, response to the Christian message. And all of them leave you and me feeling at a loss, because there's not a lot we can do about any of them.

But there is another factor that encourages people to reject the Christian faith. It's quite basic. And it's something that you and I can, indeed must, strive to correct.

You see, somewhere along the line a terrible misunderstanding has crept in. We've given the world the impression that Christianity is basically a list of instructions for living – a checklist of do's and don'ts. Tick enough boxes and you qualify as a Christian. Tick even more and you're a good Christian. Tick just a few and at least you can claim to be a Christian fellow-traveller.

Our efforts at the Christian education of the young seem, alas, to have taught people to denounce, but not to think; to moralise, but not to wonder.

The confusion increases, arousing even more resentment, when religious groups claim the right to lay down the law not just for their own people but for everyone else as well. Media attention given to the so-called Australian Christian Lobby has lost us many friends.

Worse, this "rules and regulations" approach to Christianity causes mayhem within the church itself, when we're tempted to try sorting out the saints from the sinners, the virtuous from those who are not, the people who should belong from those who should not.

Whenever the holy pounce on those they see as unholy, whenever the pious build walls against the rest, tragedy always follows. It's the fastest way I know to split churches, stir ill feeling, cause hurt – and, incidentally, give the Christian faith a very bad name.

No wonder Mark Twain once referred to someone as "*A good man in the worst sense of the word*". We know exactly what he meant.

This is a tendency to which the religious life of Sydney, more than most cities, seems especially prone. Our churches have never quite grown past the 19th century idea that we're here to cajole the convicts into decency, we are here to defend Christianity's threatened ramparts against every threat.

Moralizers may be conservatives. Or - note this, Pitt Street! - they may be progressives. Or they may be from any point in between.

Whenever Christians talk about the faith in a way that reduces it to a shopping list of rules, we have lost the plot. We've obscured the heart of it all – the staggering claim that God so loved the world, the whole world, everyone without exception, the whole wonderful, appalling, spectacular human catastrophe. God so loved that he gave his only Son.

What have we done to the gospel that makes people not want to embrace it? We have misrepresented it, that's what. Somehow, we've managed to turn good news into bad, wondering into hectoring, mystery into moralizing. We have hidden the gospel of grace.

Remember the gospel passage we heard a few minutes ago.

The farmer ... the crop ... the wheat and, among it, the weeds ... and the question, what to do with those weeds? Jesus' response, you will recall, was: don't fret about weeds. Let God worry about the alleged weediness of others. You, concentrate on the loving. Dealing with people inclusively, refusing to write anybody off. Judge not, because judgement lies with One who is wiser – and vastly more understanding - than we will ever be.

When we Christians and our congregations across the land manage to live out more wholeheartedly, more evangelically, the grace-filled mystery that is in the heart of God, all those who thought they knew what Christianity is all about, and rejected it, are in for the most wonderful surprise.

So - let God do the weeding.

After all, you and I have more than enough to keep us busy, with the living, the listening, the loving, the wondering, ... and the celebrating.

Thanks be to God!