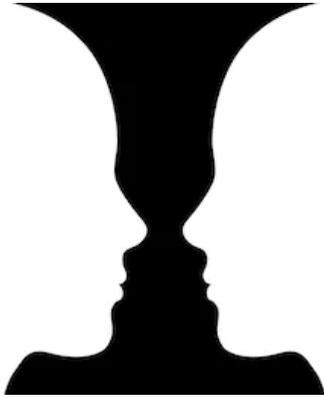


ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE – SUNDAY 19th JULY 2020

INTRODUCTION



You may have seen this image or one like it before. Is it two faces, or a vase? The answer is – both. But what if someone insisted, “Well, which is it? It must be one or the other!” The answer would still be – both.

Which is God – just, or merciful? Our experience of life tells us that

you cannot really be both at the same time. Either justice prevails at the cost of denying mercy, or mercy prevails and justice is foregone. But today's readings invite us to believe and trust in a God who is both perfectly just (no evil will ultimately remain) and perfectly merciful (nothing good will be lost). Quite how or when this will be accomplished is a mystery, but that it will be accomplished – that is surely one of the deepest truths to which the death and resurrection of Christ points us.

What are you crying out for today? For justice, or for mercy? God's unfailing promise to you is that He offers both. So pause for a moment to hear God's reassurance of mercy and acceptance; and that He can mend whatever is broken.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Among the poor,
among the proud,
among the persecuted
among the privileged

CHRIST IS COMING TO MAKE ALL THINGS NEW

In the private house,
in the public place,
in the wedding feast
in the judgement hall

CHRIST IS COMING TO MAKE ALL THINGS NEW

With a gentle touch,
with an angry word,
with a clear conscience,
with burning love,

CHRIST IS COMING TO MAKE ALL THINGS NEW

That the kingdom might come,
that the world might believe,
that the proud might stumble,
that the hidden might be seen,

CHRIST IS COMING TO MAKE ALL THINGS NEW

Within us, without us
behind us, before us,
in this place, in every place,
for this time, for all time,

CHRIST IS COMING TO MAKE ALL THINGS NEW

Because you made the world,
And intended it to be a good place,

And called its people your children;
Because, when things seemed at their worst,
You came in Christ to bring out the best in us;
So gracious God, we gladly say:

**Goodness is stronger than evil,
Love is stronger than hate,
Light is stronger than darkness,
Truth is stronger than lies.**

Because confusion can reign inside us, despite our faith;
Because anger, tension, bitterness and envy distort our vision;
Because our minds sometimes worry small things out of all
proportion;
Because we do not always get it right,
We want to believe:

**Goodness is stronger than evil,
Love is stronger than hate,
Light is stronger than darkness,
Truth is stronger than lies.**

Because you have promised to hear us
And are able to change us,
And are willing to make our hearts your home,
We ask you to confront, control,
Forgive and encourage us,
As you know best.

Silence

**Lord, hear our prayer,
And change our lives
Until we illustrate the grace
Of the God who makes all things new.
Amen.**

**NEW TESTAMENT READING (Romans 8:12-25 New Living
Translation)**

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do. For if you live by its dictates, you will die. But if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, "Abba, Father." For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering.

Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. For all creation is waiting eagerly for that

future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse.

But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us. We were given this hope when we were saved. (If we already have something, we don't need to hope for it. But if we look forward to something we don't yet have, we must wait patiently and confidently.)

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING (Matthew 13:24-30,36-43 NRSV)

He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to

him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" 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; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.' He answered, 'The one 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, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Thanks be to God.

REFLECTION

What would you do if you could be God for just a few days? Think of all the things you could sort out – just like that!

That was the idea behind the 2003 comedy film, *Bruce Almighty*. Bruce, a down-on-his-luck TV reporter, keeps complaining to God that He isn't doing His job very well, and is offered the chance to try being God himself for a week. Needless to say, it turns out to be a far more complicated and difficult job than Bruce had realised, and he is only too glad to give the responsibility back to the Almighty when his time is up.

Perhaps top on the list of difficult things on God's *To-Do* List (if you'll pardon the expression) is: how to deal with all the evil in the world? Which of us hasn't at some point wondered why God doesn't deal with the shocking stuff we see on our TV screens and read about in the papers – and, while He's at it, with some of the things we ourselves encounter? Perhaps we have even been tempted to think we could do a better job.

Jesus' story of the weed-filled wheat field doesn't attempt to give a systematic answer to those questions; but it does offer a glimpse of something very profound which it is all too easy to miss.

To tell the same story in a slightly different way, imagine you are working in your garden or allotment. You've been meticulous in preparing the ground, and sowing some of your favourite varieties of seeds. It's early in the growing season, and the shoots are barely beginning to push through. Something catches your eye: here and there you can see leaves which don't look quite like the seeds you have sown should. Weeds! And not just the odd isolated weed: as you look carefully, you realise they are everywhere. But are you 100% sure which is which? At this point in their growth cycle, the plants and the weeds look awfully similar. The only way to be really sure is to come back when they are fully developed: then you can see each for what it is.

In the same way, Jesus suggests, if God were to root out all the evil in the world now, there is a risk of collateral damage: some good may be lost in the process.

Now, you may be thinking (even if you are far too polite to say so): *Isn't that a bit lame?*

Is it really that hard to tell the difference between good and evil? After all, we are talking about God here. Surely He is up to the job? (Thoughts of Bruce Almighty again.)

Yes, perhaps it might seem a bit lame.

Until you stop to think about yourself.

Which are you: good or bad?

I would guess that your first reaction might be, "Well, of course I'm one of the good ones!" But I suspect that each of us, if we are really honest, when we look inside will see both good and bad, tangled up like that ball of different wools at the bottom of your sewing bag, or like the odds and ends of twine in your garden shed. Separating them out is a real headache. Speaking personally, I know that hardly anything I do, hardly any thought I have is purely good. Too often it's tinged with pride or self-interest, or something else a bit sordid. But then again, hardly anything I do is totally bad. Even in my worst moments, there is usually a glimmer of kindness or honesty or some redeeming quality. And all too often, it's actually quite hard to see where the bad stops and the good begins, or vice versa. And that is the problem. How on earth can these things be disentangled inside us?

I think Jesus is asking us to recognise that our lives and actions are complicated. Can I even begin to imagine what it would be like for God to root out what is selfish or cruel or greedy in me? Do I know what would be left? Would it even feel like me?

And if that is true of me ... well, I suppose it must also be true of him and her and them – those people I am so quick to judge, the ones who (I tend to think) "need to be sorted out".

The fact is, God is still working on me: I'm not the finished article yet. Becoming who I was truly created to be in Christ takes time – lots of it! And while that work-in-progress is ongoing, I know I need God's compassion and am grateful for it. Perhaps you feel the same?

If you do, then God invites me and you to look with a little more compassion on other people, too.

God's promise to us is that the evil in us and in the world will be dealt with. One day the garden or allotment – to repeat that picture – will be full to overflowing with nothing but flowers, or fruit, or vegetables. St Paul sees the whole of Creation "groaning" with yearning for the day when that is finally accomplished. Christ's daily challenge to his people is to be fired up with the same longing, to resist evil wherever we encounter it (including in ourselves).

But we are to do so not with the narrow perspective or impatience of a Bruce Almighty, or an Andy Almighty, or [Insert Name Here] Almighty. We are to live with generosity to ourselves and others, with patience, and with trust in the compassion of God who will not allow anything to be lost which is good, or praiseworthy, or upright.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

We cannot measure how you heal
or answer every sufferer's prayer,
yet we believe your grace responds
where faith and doubt unite to care.
Your hands, though bloodied on the cross,
survive to hold and heal and warn,
to carry all through death to life
and cradle children yet unborn.

The pain that will not go away,
the guilt that clings from things long past,
the fear of what the future holds,
are present as if meant to last.
But present too is love which tends
the hurt we never hoped to find,
the private agonies inside,
the memories that haunt the mind.

So some have come who need your help
and some have come to make amends,
as hands which shaped and saved the world
are present in the touch of friends.
Lord, let your Spirit meet us here
to mend the body, mind and soul,
to disentangle peace from pain,
and make your broken people whole.

REMINDING OURSELVES OF THE GOD IN WHOM WE TRUST

Do you believe and trust in God the Father,
source of all being and life,
the one for whom we exist?

All We believe and trust in him.

Do you believe and trust in God the Son,
who took our human nature,
died for us and rose again?

All We believe and trust in him.

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit,
who gives life to the people of God
and makes Christ known in the world?

All We believe and trust in him.

This is the faith of the Church.

All This is our faith.

**We believe and trust in one God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**

Amen.

PRAYERS

Let us draw near to the just and merciful God,
And pour out our concerns
For the Church and for the world.

Lord our God,
As we join the unending cycle of prayer on our planet,

Turning through time and space,
We rejoice in your upholding,
Your mercy and forgiveness.
In all our small-mindedness
We ask your inbreathing,
So that we learn to look with your vision
And act with your wideness of compassion.

Silence

God of mercy,

Hear us as we pray.

Lord our God,
Be present at all meetings and negotiations,
Where feelings run high,
And many lives are profoundly affected by the decisions
made.
We pray for real communication
Which listens to needs and appreciates difficulties,
So that we may live on this earth together in harmony and
peace.

Silence

God of mercy,

Hear us as we pray.

Lord our God,
We pray for this neighbourhood

And the particular problems it has;
For communities split apart by conflict
Or crushed by tragedy;
We pray for those involved with court proceedings;
May our judicial system uphold your principle
Of justice with mercy.

Silence

God of mercy,

Hear us as we pray.

Lord our God,
We pray for those who have a raw deal in this life;
For those with ongoing health problems,
And all who are caught up in war and deprivation.
We pray for a just and realistic sharing of our resources,
And courage, support and healing for all who suffer.

Silence

God of mercy,

Hear us as we pray.

Lord our God,
We pray for those who have died
And now see their lives as they really are;
We pray for your mercy on them,
And thank you for all their acts of goodness and love.

Among those who have died recently, we remember Bryan Pardoe, Stuart Foster and Peter Young.

And among those whose anniversaries fall at this time, we remember with love and gratitude: Reg Pritchard, Mary Pritchard, Stanley Kennett, Elvina Kennett, Alan Dugdale, Gordon Neal, Joy Cox, and David Cooper.

Silence

God of mercy,

Hear us as we pray.

Take a few moments to remember before God other people and situations on your heart now.

Lord our God,

In all the events and phases of our life

We give you thanks

For your steadfast and unchanging love

Which sustains and directs us.

Merciful Father

Accept these prayers

For the sake of your Son,

Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

We pray as Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily
bread.**

**Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who
sin against us.**

**Lead us not into
temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the
power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**Our Father, who art in
heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily
bread.**

**And forgive us our
trespasses,
as we forgive those who
trespass against us.
And lead us not into
temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.**

CLOSING BLESSING

Christ be beside me, Christ be before me,
Christ be behind me, King of my heart.
Christ be within me, Christ be below me,
Christ be above me, never to part.

Christ on my right hand, Christ on my left hand,
Christ all around me, shield in the strife.
Christ in my sleeping, Christ in my sitting,
Christ in my rising, light of my heart.

Christ be in all hearts thinking about me,
Christ be on all tongues telling of me.
Christ be the vision in eyes that see me,
In ears that hear me Christ ever be.

ENDING

**Lord, set your blessing on us
as we go forward into the week ahead.
Confirm in us the truth by which we should live;
confront us with the truth from which we wrongly turn.**

**We ask not simply for what we want
but for what you know we need;
and we offer you this day and ourselves
through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

**And may the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with us all evermore.
Amen.**

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