

A great trick to play on a visiting preacher is to get them in on Trinity Sunday, to wrestle with the doctrine of the three-in-one God. I'd say today runs a close second, with the lurid wailing and gnashing of teeth offered in our reading from Matthew.

Matthew's focus is on God as judge; it is an unpalatable, frightening image for some. Of course, there are other images of God in our scriptures. God is seen as a faithful and loving spouse to God's people, and God is a mother (Hos 11.3-4): a mother who comforts, nurses, teaches, and defends (Isa 49.15, 66.13; Hos 13.8). God is a mother eagle, carrying us on strong wings (Deut 23.11-12), and God is like a hen calling her chicks to come and shelter beneath her wings; an image picked up by both Luke (13.34) and Matthew (23.37). But there is a consistent portrayal of the God of Israel as judge, which we hear Matthew pick up on today.

There's a temptation to read this parable of Matthew's as a commentary on evil people and good people, but then we inevitably fall into the trap of wondering who is who: even fine people in church begin to pit themselves against one another, or the church as a whole sets itself apart, feeling like the victim of persecution by an evil world. It's 'us' versus 'them'.

Perhaps it is more helpful to take from his words the simple affirmation that good and evil co-inhabit this world, and we needn't be fearful or surprised about that; indeed, to be surprised would seem disingenuous. Yes, we look forward to healing for the world; yes, we are called to be wheat, salt, light, to be holy... but that call includes learning the practice of patience and hope, hope which thrives and grows right alongside evil.¹ Wheat and weeds; weeds and wheat.

Our Hebrew ancestors were no strangers to this confluence of currents, the divine and the mundane: see, the ladder is set up; here are the feet; see the top of it reaching to heaven; the angels of God are already continually ascending and descending on it. Our closer brother, Paul, picks it up with his pulling of the future judgement into the present. There may be a reckoning time to come, but it is also already happening. The descendants of Jacob have already been brought back to the land of God-with-us, and the blessing is already being showered upon all the world's families. In Paul's church, all kinds of people gather to worship; the privileged and the powerful rub shoulders with the untouchable, and the unmentionable. This is, perhaps something of what it means to be unavoidably anchored in the here-and-now, but *living* in-spirit-and-in-truth. Weeds and wheat; wheat and weeds.

¹ Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today* (Strathfield, NSW: St Paul's Publications, 2010), 111.

What will we see, though, if we climb up the ladder, up the cross, into the tomb, into the manger? Climb and look, and see...God's face, blessing and judgement.

One of the earliest depictions of Christ is the Christ Pantocrator icon.² The oldest one known was written in the sixth century, and preserved in the monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai desert. In the painting, Christ is seen as the Righteous Judge and as the Lover of Humankind, both at the same time. His left hand holds the book of the Gospels, the measure by which we are judged. His right hand is raised in blessing; it is a proclamation of God's lovingkindness towards us.

This ruler of the world wears no crown, carries no scepter, commands no army. His mouth is not open to command, condemn, or comfort. He keeps silent, and simply faces us square-on, his eyes wide open, gazing directly into our soul, holding up a mirror to us. He is God-with-us, mother hen and living word; among us and inside us, judging and blessing. Because he loves, his judgement is blessing; his abundant blessing, judgement.

One of the truest experiences of judgement we can have in this life is the experience of coming face to face with God-with-among-in-us, an encounter with what lies beneath our surface; all that we hide and shun, all that is unknown about ourselves, the unpalatable *and* the lovable. For this we need to close our mouths, like Christ Pantocrator (*you might like to close your eyes...*), and open the eyes and ears of our hearts.

It's judgement with the blessing of truth in it; a judgement that comes when we let Jesus' words – living words, living water – form a deep well inside; a pool we can gaze into. Take your time...see the surface of the water, like a mirror. What do you see? Who do you see looking back at you? What is being touched in your heart? What is it that has been taking you further away from God? What has brought you closer? What grace do you need? You can be honest. This is judgement, and this is blessing.

And these are your weeds and your wheat! They are hard to tell apart, and they grow so closely together, you can hardly take out the weeds without uprooting all the good as well. Such is the subtlety of the human heart. But look at these weeds, look at this wheat, and understand that God's grace allows time for all to mature. In God's economy, a thousand years is as a day; plenty of time for judgement, and for healing. Know this. And know that the judge is also the one who blesses, also the Divine mother hen.

Amen.

² Gk, ruler of all.