

In 2008 the film *God on Trial* was released. In this drama set in a concentration camp, a group of new inmates, unsure of their appointed fates, begin asking how God could allow for so much suffering. Impulsively, the men decide to put God on trial for abandoning His chosen people. It is an incredibly powerful film which I commend to you and asks many of the questions we all ask when we are despairing or facing pain and sadness. In these recent days of pandemic, with so much suffering and pain meet-out on so many all around the globe, again people are asking where is God in all of this? Some have even written to me expecting me to be able to give them the latest theological solution to the problem of evil. Alas, I too struggle with the problem, and probably have nothing to say that they would like to hear. But what I do have to say, is that God is love. And in the midst of all this pain God continues to love us and God hurts alongside us.

Today's gospel reading is in some ways Jesus' theological treatise on the problem of evil, but in order for us to understand it, we need to look more closely at the text and at the analogies contained within it.

At the beginning of the passage we are told that the fields are planted with good seed and that once planting was complete the workers went and rested. During this rest, an enemy sowed weeds amongst the good seed.

Here we see an analogy being made with the creation narratives. The good seed represents the world, creation, perfect and full of goodness. It provides us with a picture of the world perfectly made and unblemished, void of sin and evil. However, as the gospel describes, an enemy comes into the field and sows weeds amongst the wheat. If we go back to the creation narratives again, we can see that this is when the devil enters the world, and tries, successfully, to tempt Eve into eating of the forbidden fruit. In popular iconography, the serpent is portrayed as being the 'evil one', but according to Genesis chapter 3 this is not the case. The serpent was created by God, a loving God, (who does not create evil) to be more crafty than the rest of creation, and yet also as 'good' in the sight of the Lord. It is since the creation of the natural world that evil has entered into the serpent and therefore into the world.

This analogy therefore depicts the world as created good, and only post-creation does evil come into the world, and not by the hands of God.

The Gospel then goes on to show the shock and disbelief of those who have laboured in the fields, thinking that their master (God) had given them weeds to plant, instead of grain. If we transpose this into our own context, these feelings are those shared by many of this generation thinking that God had initiated these acts of devastation. God however did not. What he created, or planted, was good and that these acts of devastation are the work of the evil one, of a fallen creation.

The passage then goes on to say how we should deal with the problem of evil. This does not make for comfortable listening, but we should listen, as it is really quite profound. We read that the labourers ask whether they should pull out the weeds and destroy them. However, they are told not to since by doing so they will ruin the good seed and the good harvest. Instead, they are instructed to let the two grow side by side until harvest time and then at the time of harvesting the wheat and the weeds will be divided.

This, for me, is the hardest part. From the text it appears that God allows evil to happen and that He is impotent in regards of how to act against it. God however is not impotent as we have seen in and through His gift to the world in Jesus. Jesus is the gift of love that is stronger than any power of evil.

So why does God allow evil to happen if He is a God of love? It is precisely because God is a God of love, and a God that gives us free-will to choose our own paths, that evil must necessarily exist. If evil did not exist we would not have the choice to make between doing that which is good and that which is evil.

But God however, makes it abundantly clear through the life of his son, Jesus, what our choice and actions should be. Jesus teaches and shows us that we should love God and love our neighbours as ourselves. These are the fundamentals of our faith. If we do this, how can we do anything but that which is good?

As Christians we accept these rules of life, but how often do we actually comply with them? Do we actually love God? Do we actually love our neighbours as ourselves? It is all too easy, in a moment of annoyance to bitch about someone behind their back. It is all too easy, when things are going well, to think that our success is down to ourselves and not give thanks to God. But that is not what we are called to do.

We are called to love God and love our neighbours as ourselves. And by so doing, we are called to show that by the way we live. As the passage describes, until the day of harvest, the day of judgement, we are called to live alongside the weeds, those who do evil acts. The passage does not say that we should act like those who practise evil intent, but that we should live alongside them. Just as the wheat did not change from being wheat – full of goodness, even though it was surrounded by weeds – we are called to do the same. We are called not to give into the bad things that are around us, but remain faithful to that which is good.

This I know is easier said than done, but that is our mission, our objective, our aim. We are called to stand up for the Gospel, the Good News. Maybe that means that we have to be counter-cultural and stand firm for what we believe in, regardless of when people all around us are deriding what we believe. Maybe that means that we should show love to everyone that we meet, regardless of whether we like them. Maybe that means stopping and talking to someone in the street who we wouldn't normally talk to. Whatever it might mean, we are called to show God's love here on earth. We are called to show how much He loves us and everyone else. By so doing, how can we but do that which is good?