

## Trinity 6 2020 Parable of the tares

So this moth goes into a podiatrist's office. The podiatrist asks the moth, "What seems to be the problem?"

The moth says, "Doc, I don't know where to start. I feel like my whole life has been a waste of time. I've been at the same job for twenty years and I don't just hate it, I'm revolted by it. I can barely summon the strength to drag myself in every day but I have no choice because I'm in debt up to my compound eyes. The idea of doing this job for years more just makes me sick. I feel like my entire life is nothing more than a fragile web of lies just barely holding me back from the screaming abyss."

The podiatrist says to the moth, "You do seem to have a lot of problems, but I'm just a podiatrist. You need to see a therapist, a psychiatrist even. Why did you come to me?"

And the moth says, "The light was on."

The light was on – like the moth we are all subconsciously drawn to things. What are we drawn to?

Well one thing is that great source of light and entertainment – the TV - *I don't know quite what we would have done without that during lockdown!*

We are drawn to the light and excitement of shopping, to the bright lights of nights out, and of course we have discovered through having it closed to us that we are drawn to our church. The light and peace of this building.

Because we have not been able to come to church we have perhaps also started over the past few months to navigate a

different course to God – not relying so much on public worship and more on private prayer at home.

And as we begin the exit from lockdown things will change yet more. We will find more and more competition for our attention, as shops, pubs, and all sorts of other venues reopen, as the children begin perhaps to return to after school clubs and life begins to get really busy again.

Like a moth presented with many different sources of light we will inevitably be drawn this way and that.

What does this mean for my faith, for your faith?

As we exit lockdown things will also have changed in the church. There was a piece in the news last week about St. Margaret's Westminster. The church for the houses of Parliament. It has had to close for Sunday worship.

Westminster Abbey, which relies so much on visitors for its income has seen its finances collapse in the past few months and it can no longer afford the £100,000 it costs to run Sunday services at St Margaret's every year. This was unthinkable before lockdown.

Lockdown has in many ways made visible the hidden fault lines in the institution of the church. It has brought into sharp relief the fact that we in the Church of England have been trying to operate a Christendom model when Christendom has disappeared.

We have been precariously keeping going, in denial of the fact that for many the church is, sadly, irrelevant.

The early church did not operate a Christendom model, the early church was hounded, maligned and persecuted. It ran counter to its culture.

Until the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in the year 312 there was no such thing as Christendom. There is very little if anything to suggest that Jesus ever expected his church to become the religion of Empire – quite the reverse; he warned his disciples what to expect, and this was not that they would be nice and secure.

But after Constantine's conversion Christianity became the faith of the Empire. And so, 1700 years later Christianity is still the institutional faith of our Nation. The idea is that the institutional church covers everybody, whether or not they come to church or even believe. That the church is there for them and they are (*whether they like it or not*) sort of members because they are English.

This may have worked quite well when belief was in the majority and our faith was more or less accepted by everybody, but it is getting harder and harder to sustain, and lockdown has really begun to show this up.

And so our society is a living portrait of the parable of the wheat and tares in our gospel this morning. The parable speaks of God's patience as we wait for his judgement. But it's not pink and fluffy (as we say in the military):

*The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, <sup>42</sup>and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup>Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears\* listen!*

It contains a serious warning - judgement is coming. The problem I think is how we interpret this parable as the influence of Christianity wanes in the West. If the Kingdom (the field) is to be identified with society in general what does this say about the place of the church in society? What is the role of the church now?

Like moths to a flame the church is pulled in so many different directions by dint of being established, and we perhaps more than ever need to get things together and work out what we are for.

1. I think the most important thing for us to do is be honest.

We shouldn't pretend that Christendom is still with us – we should be honest about our place in society now. We may still, just, be established and have Bishops in the House of Lords but society is drawn to so many sources of light that our faith is now seen by many to be one of many options.

2. And I think this is key. The parable of wheat and tares **is about the patience of God** but its also a call to personal renewal. If I look at my life how many weeds can I see? To continue with my analogy, if I am a moth how many other competing sources of light are there in my life? How many things compete with a wholehearted response to follow Jesus who calls me? If the end of the age happened tomorrow how happy would I be about my spiritual progress?

The parable of the wheat and tares reminds us of God's forbearance but it is also a reminder to us that we should worry more about our own spiritual health than that of the nation. And this is all the more important as we emerge into a rapidly changing world.

How else will the church be a noticeable light in a society which has many, many other lights attracting people? Unless we are distinctive and attend to the tares within ourselves?