

## UNFINISHED BUSINESS

### Sermon at the Eucharist on the Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Wisdom 12: 13,16-19; Romans 8: 12-25; Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43.

**A** CONVERSATION which (with variations) has taken place many times over the years. Question from an unsuspecting visitor:

How old is Worcester Cathedral?’

Me: ‘Well, the present building was begun in 1084, but has been largely rebuilt since then. It replaced an older cathedral nearby, which replaced an even older cathedral, so it’s hard to say when it started’.

The visitor (in a tone of puzzlement): ‘So when was it finished?’

Me: ‘Well, the rebuilding went on for a couple of centuries, and then there were periods of restoration which were almost a rebuilding, so it’s hard to say when it was finished’.

The visitor (determined to establish some definite fact in this morass of uncertainty): ‘Anyway, you just couldn’t build something like this nowadays’.

Me: ‘But that’s not entirely true, because the largest Gothic cathedral in England was dedicated as recently as 1978, and the great tower at St Edmundsbury was built to mark the millennium. We certainly *could* build a new Gothic cathedral; it would cost a lot of money - though much less than HS2’. But by now the visitor has wandered off in search of coffee.

Gothic cathedrals have the annoying habit of neither starting nor stopping in a tidy way; they are organic structures; that is to say, they resemble a living organism; and a living organism is always a piece of unfinished business.

Unfinished business is the subject of this morning’s readings; at any rate, those from the Letter of Paul to the Romans and from the Gospel of St Matthew. They are both about living organisms, and both are stories of unfinished business.

We are not told what prompted the Lord’s parable about the weeds sown among the wheat (what we used to call the ‘parable of the wheat and the tares’) but we can guess. ‘Why doesn’t God do something to stop the evil of the world?’ The question is as old as the capacity of human beings to ask questions. They were puzzling over it in ancient Babylon, a thousand years before Christ. The Book of Job puzzles over it. No doubt this was the question from someone in the crowd which prompted Jesus to tell this parable. ‘Why doesn’t God do something to stop the evil of the world?’

The world is like a wheatfield, Jesus says in reply. The farmer hopes for good wheat, but it has been sown with weeds that spoil the crop. So what will the farmer do – take a scythe to his field in the hope of catching the weeds and missing the young shoots of wheat? If he tries to do that, he’ll take both the weeds and the wheat as well. There’s nothing for it but to let the

wheatfield be, however unlovely and uncared for it may look. Then at harvest he'll scythe the lot, and sit down and sort the weeds from the wheat.

'The good seed' says Jesus, 'are the children of the kingdom; and the weeds are the children of the evil one'. Ah, but how do we tell the difference between the children of the kingdom and the children of the evil one, when both look the same, both young green shoots in the field? Indeed the choice is harder than that, because a child of the kingdom and the child of the evil one have the habit of being the same person. Not even an angel could wield the kind of sickle that could separate the righteous from the wicked, when each of us is a mixture of the two. When we face some egregious wickedness, we feel confident enough to ask why God didn't stop *that* one, *that* child of the devil; but what of the day-to-day sin that runs through each of us? We may not be murderers – but the Lord says that murder begins with anger in the heart, and perhaps we know something of that. We may not be adulterers – but the Lord says that adultery begins with lust in the eye, and perhaps we know something of that. So we may be grateful that the angels *don't* use their sickles to probe our hearts too deeply, or try to cut the green shoots of wickedness out of them; we may be grateful that God tells his angels to wait a little longer, for God knows that by harvest-time we may, by his grace, be just a little more of a child of the kingdom and just a little less a child of the devil. We shall be glad then to have been unfinished business, because while there is unfinished business in our lives, there is the hope of becoming better.

St Paul talks of unfinished business in the passage we heard from his Letter to the Romans. But here he is speaking not only of individual human souls, but the whole world, indeed the whole universe:

The creation, [he says] will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

There isn't time to explore the whole of this passage, but Paul is painting an astonishing picture of the entire universe finally escaping the shackles of its inevitable decay, and sharing in the redemption which God promises to his children. Inconceivable; unimaginable; Paul hovers on the furthest edge of intelligible language as he struggles to express the sovereignty of God over all things, including the cosmos itself. But for our purpose this morning, we need only notice that Paul is saying that not only you and I but the whole created order is God's *unfinished* business.

The builders of our Gothic cathedrals knew that if they were in at the laying of the foundation stone they wouldn't be there at the dedication. They had an outlook, which most of us would be too impatient to put up with, which accepted the idea of unfinished business,

indeed of life itself as unfinished business. But then they were building *cathedrals*: that is to say, they were trying to construct, in stone and glass and wood, an image of the temple of God – an image of heaven itself. They were trying to make an earthly copy of something that, by definition, had no beginning and no end. And one way of expressing that was to keep building, indeed sometimes to pull it down and start again, but never, ever, to say, ‘We’ve finished’ – because then it would not be like heaven at all.

St Paul tells us elsewhere in his letters that we too – each one of us - are temples of God. Which means that we too, in God’s eyes, are never finished; he makes us and he remakes us and he improves us and he takes us further and further, and (if we will let him) more and more like him - but he’s never done with us.

Seventeen centuries ago, when the world was in ruins, and law and order had broken down, and people’s lives were blighted by war and plague and famine, the great Augustine asked himself where certainty was to be found. And he wrote his answer in a book about heaven called *The City of God*. Augustine’s answer was that we could find certainty in the city of God, the kingdom of God, the heavenly Jerusalem, not by way of escaping this world but by way of managing our lives in this world while keeping our eyes fixed on God. But he didn’t make the mistake of saying that our spiritual journey ends when we reach the City of God. Even there, we are God’s unfinished business; and even there, there is no end to our exploring. Augustine ends the book with these words:

We shall empty ourselves and then we shall see;

We shall see and then we shall love;

We shall love and then we shall praise.

Behold what shall be in the end without an end.

For what is our end if not to come to that kingdom where there is no end?

Emptying ourselves of ourselves so that our vision is cleansed; seeing, and loving what we see; loving, and praising what we love. And this, says Augustine, is *fine sine fine* – the end without an end. St Paul called it the glorious liberty of the children of God. Jesus said that the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father. Perhaps we need only say that God has never done with us; like a cathedral, we remain his unfinished business.

PETER ATKINSON  
*Dean of Worcester*

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