

**Sermon on Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43**  
**Finding Our Hopeful Balance**

**So, it has been pretty cold these last few days.**

Beanies on.

0-7 one day in Orange, just a little worse than our 2-8 on Thursday.

The wind has been blowing making it seem even colder.

Thicker beanies on.

When I was a kid and the wind blew we used to play a game.

We used to stand with our feet planted firmly on the ground and see how far we could lean forward before we toppled over.

Now I think about it, it's not really much of a game!

Still, in a big blow we could really lean quite far.

We pushed into the wind.

We could keep our balance in the blow.

And in fact it was in leaning forward that there seemed to be a kind of equilibrium in the gale.

Stand straight upright and the wind would push us back and we'd near fall over, until we righted ourselves again.

Lean forward and we could stand, and be and look forward, even amid the storm.

**Christian faith is like this.**

We stand with our feet planted in the here and now, among the struggles of the world, but we lean forward into a future where we believe God is waiting for us.

Where he is calling us.

Where he is already preparing a place and a way for us.

Where Jesus is.

We look forward to what Charles Pinches calls a 'unifying end, a share in God's Kingdom.'

Where there is no more suffering or sorrow or pain.

No more tears as Revelation puts it.

No more injustice.

No more hunger and heartache.

Things our world knows all too well.

No more death, for Jesus is risen from the dead.

And he is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

The love of God is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

We live for this end, to this end, we face into the wind, we cling onto this hope.

**Amid the harsh winds of life, our own inner and outer struggles, leaning forward is the only way to really keep our balance in faith: our equilibrium.**

It's the only way to testify to the world that there is better to come.

That there will be a new day.

And a great feast where all are welcome, stranger, neighbour, saint and sinner.

A great gathering where we will embrace each other as God embraces us.

We prefigure this in the communion every time we share it.

Communion points forward, we look forward.

We hold hands and say the grace.

Connected, one, leaning into God.

A great biblical scholar once said that when it comes down to it, all of Christianity is tied up in a doctrine of hope.

Of what *will be* in Christ.

Leaning forward is how we live in hope today.

It's how we keep our balance and take part in Christ's Kingdom by faith.

Not standing upright as if there are no headwinds to face and the here and now is all we must take heed of.

Not taking the optimistic view that life will always improve over our roughly three score and ten years.

Our experience tells us this won't be the case.

'Ministry', as David Hoyle puts it, in which we're all engaged all the time, 'must strive to set the hope of the whole kingdom before us.'

We could expand it, and before the whole world.

**So Matthew's Gospel. Not for the faint hearted.**

Barbara Brown Taylor once said that if Matthew had a church in her home town she would enter cautiously and perhaps keep to the back, close to the door.

Made for a ready escape you see.

Is that why churches always fill up from the back first?

Preparing for a quick getaway?

Matthew has some jagged contours.

He sees things more black and whitely than his Gospel counterparts.

His gospel has a sharper edge.

It's only in Matthew that we have the weeping and gnashing of teeth, the sheep and goats, the wheat and tares.

Matthew is keener on the consequences of the last things than the others.

You get the feeling his little fledgling church was under pressure.

The wind was blowing and finding their hopeful balance was difficult.

Recording parables like the wheat and the tares, he wants to re-assure them.

Encourage them.

Good will overcome, in the end, whatever may be endured here.

There will be a day of the reckoning of God.

The weeds may grow up among the wheat but there will be a harvest, and then the weeds will be purged away in the fire.

That's pretty uncomfortable stuff.

It's a hard line encouragement...

... made more so by Jesus' explanation.

'The weeds are the people of the evil one.', Jesus says, the one who sowed his bad seed in the field at night.

Evil is real, he is saying, and surreptitious, and malign. Don't be fooled.

**We tend to cringe a bit at this type of story in the church today.**

We feel nervous when the Bible speaks about judgement.

Best to leave that stuff alone we reason.

It seems to hark back to previous era we'd perhaps rather forget.

Fire and damnation and the like.

It's like receiving John the Baptist's festive greeting at Advent each year, just designed to put one in the Christmas mood – you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?

Nothing says happy Christmas like promises of the coming wrath!

We perhaps also want to stay to the back on the edge of Matthew's church, ready to make a quick getaway if necessary, especially when we read parables like this one.

This is not a comforting or easy story and we like comfort and ease.

**The world tends to think like this today too.**

Away with all that judgement stuff please, I don't want to know.

That's not my idea of religion.

And it tends to put the fault squarely at the feet of the church.

It likes to imagine a kind of binary between Jesus and the church.

Jesus yes, church no if you don't mind.

The implication is that Jesus was an okay guy, bit rough around the edges perhaps, but taught some good things, led a good moral life from which the world can certainly learn... if only the church would keep out of it.

The church, it is reasoned, has taken him over for its own nefarious purposes.

Jesus has become a tool in the churches' hands to forge political and moral power for itself, to control people, and to fill its own coffers, a charge that is distressingly not wholly untrue.

Jesus needs rescuing from the church the world wants to say, just like the communities the church has controlled all these years.

Then all would be well.

A couple of weeks ago Elizabeth Farrelly wrote an article in the SMH along these lines.

Jesus yes, church no.

If only Jesus could be loosed from his institutional shackles, he might get on okay in our world.

People might be more open to him.

Faith might look a bit more attractive and have a bit more meaning and actually be worth something.

**My hunch is stories like the wheat and the tares are not what public commentators have in mind when they say such things.**

The church has many faults and needs reforming to be sure, and we should rightly reflect on where the church has erred and seek to do better.

But church and world alike sit under the judgement of God.

Jesus isn't on anyone's 'side' in that sense, he can't be crowbarred into supporting *any* preconceived agenda.

Christian hope is not about propping up my easy certainties.

Nor is Jesus a first century precursor of secular liberal democratic values, anymore than he is of parochial churchly ones.

Any reading of Jesus worth its salt finds a searing critique of the sacred values of capitalist democracies – individualism, greed, consumerism, militarism.

We take comfort in such things, but there's no eternal hope in them.

They are fool's gold.

A nicely packaged knock off.

Seed sewn on the rocky ground which sprouts and looks good for a moment but then fades and shrivels.

Jesus can't be controlled by anyone for any purpose.

His word addresses the whole world and challenges all communities and institutions and societies to live for another Kingdom.

With a different source at heart, for a different way of being.

And far from being a passive encouragement, like a child at the zoo holding out a carrot for the giraffe, Jesus is telling the disciples and all of us, this is serious business.

Hope will change you, challenge you, re-make you.

Take a proper look at Jesus, lean forward by faith and you won't be the same.

Jesus refines us. He is not here to make us feel comfortable.

**Leaning forward in faith we press against the wind, leaning into it, defying its force while we feel its bite on our face.**

However uncomfortable the parable of the wheat and the tares might make us feel personally, if we as a community don't feel the bite of the winds of the world, there's a problem.

Aren't there in fact many things we would want to purge away if we could?

Many weeds we'd like to pull up?

Evils we'd want to stand against?

That we'd like to see done away with?

Wouldn't we want to see an end to violence of all kinds?

To suffering? To hunger and hatred?

Wouldn't we want to see peace among the nations, meaning an end to war?

And care of the poor everywhere meaning an end to greed and exploitation?

Isn't this what we pray each week in the Lord's Prayer when we say, 'Your kingdom come, your will be done.'?

Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God stands opposed to such things.

And while they might persist in the here and now, God will one day purge them away.

So take hope.

Face the bitter chill of the winter winds in the knowledge that Spring is coming and it will be glorious.

The fire of the new age of Jesus will burn away the chaff.

We may feel squeamish talking about God's judgement, and the world may want to ignore it, but wouldn't we want God to judge the things that tear us down?

The misaligned spirits that drag us collectively into world wars, civil wars, wars between families and friends, and with strangers and neighbours?

The forces that make us fearful and reactive and selfish?

**We know all too well that for all our amazing human capacities, we've created as much destruction as we have beauty.**

I remember seeing a photo online of two teenagers, one Jewish and one Muslim standing together holding a sign which simply said, 'Why can't we just get along with each other?'

Sometimes the world seems so full of hate it's hard to imagine anything could one day change.

We know this struggle in ourselves if we're honest.

On one level each of us is like that field with wheat and tares growing side by side.

We're all a mix of good and bad, have the capacity for good and evil.

Who of us would pretend never to have had an unkind thought about someone else?

Or wished someone ill?

Or chosen our own preference at the expense of others?

Or lied to save ourselves from embarrassment of some kind?

We all have. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God as St Paul says.

We like to judge public figures for such breaches, quickly forgetting Jesus' searing invitation to some Pharisees who were judging a woman one day, let he who is without sin cast the first stone.

They melted into the crowd at that point, no doubt looking at their shoes.

The first thing God judges is our propensity to judge others: to take the moral high ground as if we are the pure ones.

To act like we ourselves are God.

Samuel Johnson, that great literary figure of the 18<sup>th</sup> C once said, ‘God himself does not propose to judge a man til he dies, so why should I?’

**See we may have hope for a better world, but if we’re honest, we need a personal hope too.**

We need to imagine there is more to come or we despair, we allow the wind to blow us over without hope, and we fall flat on our back and can’t see how we might get up.

And are tempted not to try.

So many of the great biblical images for God are about strength – my rock and my redeemer, my sword and shield, my fortress and my tower.

But this is a strength in humility, a cruciform strength that is given over in the form of a suffering saviour wholly for us.

We don’t lean forward alone, but with God as our resting pole.

Hope is a gift of the Spirit which infuses into our souls and to which we incline our lives by faith.

The judgement of God is confronting, disrupting, wild, but amid all those things it’s in the first place hopeful.

The righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father, Jesus says.

So the winds may blow and bite, but in leaning forward we find our balance in Christ.

**When my dear friend and mentor Peter Pereira died a couple of years ago I saw him two weeks before his death and then two days before his death.**

He was resigned to his approaching end.

And strangely enough we didn’t talk about faith matters much.

It was as if we didn’t need to... what was unspoken at every moment was his hopefulness in and through his own death that God was with him and he need not fear.

He was leaning forward.

At the funeral where some 500 people gathered, after each speaker shared there was a repeated phrase – the light shines in the darkness, at which point a candle was lit.

If I had had my wits about me I would have had the congregation respond each time, ‘And the darkness has not overcome it.’

Leaning forward you see.

But perhaps that bit need not have been spoken either.

In a sense the silence and the lighting of the candle spoke those words powerfully amid the tears.

**There is a unifying end and it is forged in Jesus, the light.**

And whatever stage we are in life, we can live that hope today by leaning forward in faith.

Finding our hopeful balance.

You are the light of the world Matthew’s Jesus says earlier on in his Gospel.

So shine like the sun.

There is always great hope in Jesus.

Amen.