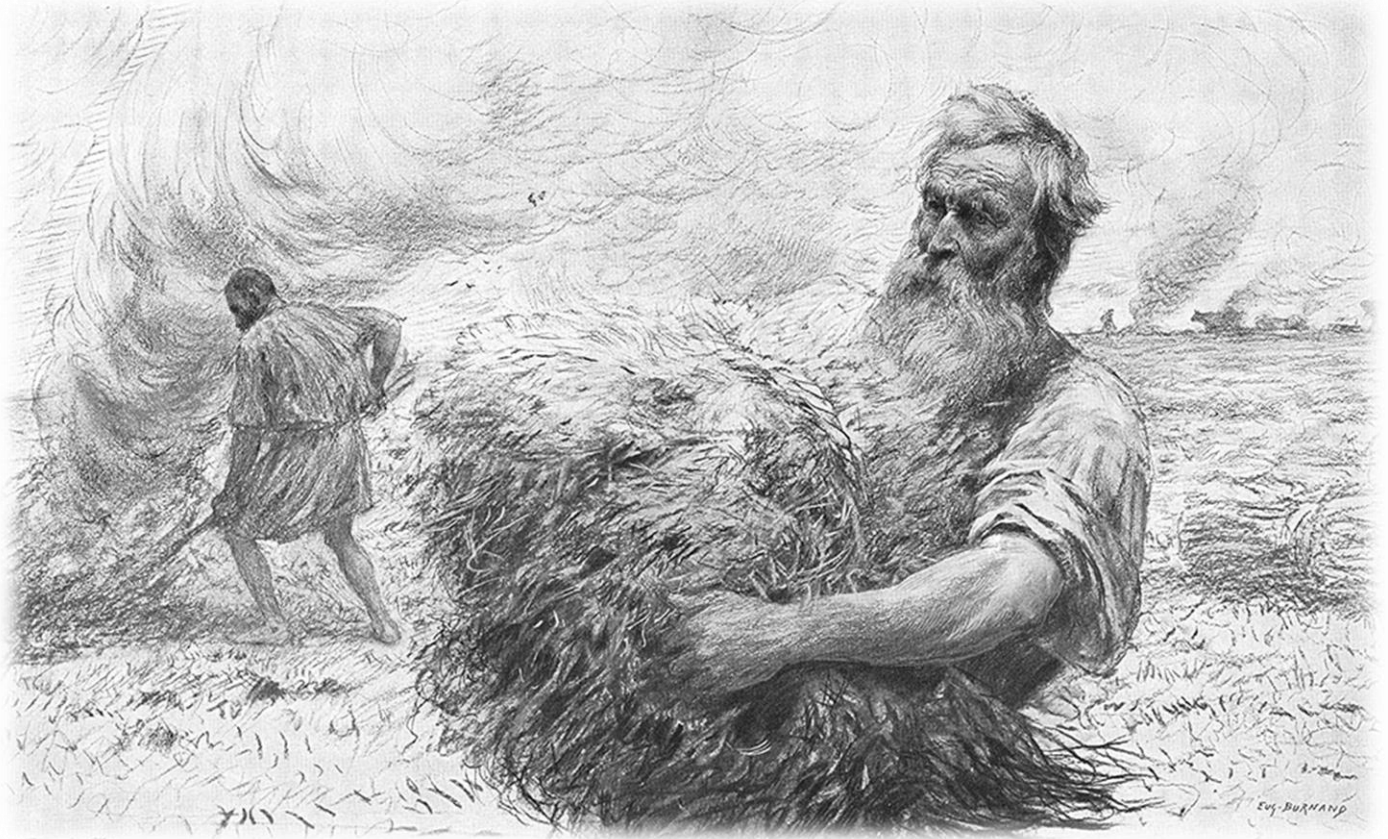


Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, 10th February 2019

The Gospel, in a sense, ended quite starkly: it seemed to be either “barn” or “burn” – “Gather up first the cockle, and bind it into bundles to burn, but the wheat gather ye into my barn” (Mt 13:30). This is definitely an apocalyptic parable, depicting the Last Judgment, and so it would seem that the Lord is now looking ahead to that “day of vengeance” (Is 61:2) which, as we noted two Sundays ago, was deliberately left out of his reading from Isaiah at Nazareth when, according to St Luke’s Gospel, the time of his earthly ministry was just beginning.



In the retreat day on St Luke, which I gave yesterday at Belmont, I highlighted the fact that ‘salvation’ plays an important role in this particular Gospel, and indeed in its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles. The theme of ‘salvation’, nevertheless, is also naturally enough present in the other Gospels. For example, the words of the Lord spoken in St Luke’s Gospel to Zacchaeus: “the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (19:10), are replicated in St Matthew, if only without the seeking bit: “the Son of man is come to save that which was lost” (18:11). The coming of Christ, the first coming, is all about saving: the very name Jesus, which the angel Gabriel of course gave him before he was conceived (cf. Lk 1:31), gives it away somewhat; ‘Jesus’ literally meaning ‘the Lord saves’.

In the Creed, we will profess that: “For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven (*propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem descendit de caelis*)”. Later on, we go on to profess Christ’s second coming: “And he will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead (*Et iterum venturus est cum gloria iudicare vivos et mortuos*)”. If his first coming was about saving us; his second is all about judging us, dead or alive. That might seem to be something of an unsettling contrast. And yet if we were to accept Christ’s first coming and the salvation which it offers, the prospect of judgment would be more acceptable and that “day of vengeance” (Is 61:2) could be viewed more in the sense of repaying as rewarding.

That does not mean though that those ultimate destinies, which we mentioned right at the beginning, “barn” or “burn” (heaven or hell, in other words), are not distinct realities as such; what must be uppermost in our minds should, however, be the acceptance of salvation in this present life, both on our part and that of others. We are encouraged in this by the Lord’s own desire “for all men to be saved” (1 Tm 2:4), and indeed by what would seem to be his innate patience. People might possibly object to him being too harsh and over keen in giving vent to his fierce anger: all that talk in today’s Gospel of the cockle; darnel; tares; weeds (or whatever you want to call it), being gathered up into bundles to be burnt (cf. Mt 13:30). Yet it is he who is the patient one and often us who in actual fact are the impatient ones, saying like those servants in the parable: “Wilt thou that we go and gather it up” (Mt 13:28), to which comes the swift reply from on high: “No” (Mt 13:29)!

Yes, we would like the Lord to be patient with us, but sometimes not so with others; that is a decidedly human way of considering things: namely, from our own little selfish standpoint. It reminds me of a certain episode in St Luke (sorry: I’ve got that Gospel still on the brain!) in which a Samaritan village proves unwelcoming to Jesus: “And when his disciples James and John had seen this, they said: Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them? And turning, he rebuked them” (Lk 9:54-55). Notice here the similarity between “Lord, wilt thou that we command” of the two disciples and “Wilt thou that we go” of the servants (Mt 13:28), and the negative response to both.

It can indeed be very difficult for us to have ‘the patience of a saint’ let alone the patience of God! Yet that is what we are called to have, as St Paul told the Colossians in today’s Epistle: “Put ye on therefore, as the elect of God, holy, and beloved, the bowels of mercy, benignity, humility, modesty, [and, last but not least] patience” (Col 3:12). When I read this, I thought it sounded familiar, and then I realised that it is exactly the same Epistle that we had for the Feast of the Holy Family four weeks ago! We, in turn, are called to form a ‘holy family’ of sorts ourselves: “Bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if any have a complaint against another: even as the Lord hath forgiven you, so do you also” (Col 3:13). Indeed, today’s Collect referred to us precisely as God’s family: “*Familiam tuam* (Your family)”. All families have to learn to bear “with one another”, “forgiving one another”, and so it is highly inappropriate for us to start weeding someone out (cf. Mt 13:28) or calling down fire upon them (cf. Lk 9:54).

Sometimes the Lord’s patience might, however, seem to be going against his promise to “come again with glory to judge” (*Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed*), but it is all in accordance with his own loving purpose. The Second Epistle of St Peter is truly apocalyptic in its tone: “the day of the Lord shall come as a thief, in which the heavens shall pass away with great violence, and the elements shall be melted with heat, and the earth and the works which are in it, shall be burnt up” (2 P 3:10). Yet, nevertheless, immediately before this terrifying description of the Last Judgment, the apostle has to convince his hearers: “The Lord delayeth not his promise, as some imagine, but dealeth patiently for your sake, not willing that any should perish, but that all should return to penance” (2 P 3:9). Repent, then, and be patient yourselves; for God himself wants no one to be “burnt up” (2 P 3:10), but rather wants us all to be gathered into his “barn” (Mt 13:30).