

Trinity 6 (Proper 11)

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Revd Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on 19 July 2020

Readings: Romans 8 vv 12-25 and Matthew 13 vv 24-30 & 36-43

Last Wednesday passed with little, if any, rain to speak of. Which was a relief – especially for those with a reverence for folklore, because Wednesday was the feast of St Swithun.

The rhyme goes thus:

*St Swithun's day if thou dost rain
for forty days it will remain
St Swithun's day if thou be fair
for forty days 'twill rain nae mare*

Swithun was an Anglo-Saxon bishop of Winchester. He is still held in great veneration in Winchester Cathedral, and the canons of Winchester gathered for a service on Wednesday afternoon (inevitably, this year, by Zoom). The source of the highly unreliable weather forecasting attributed to Swithun is that he requested to be buried outside the church. On the day the monks tried to upgrade him to burial within the cathedral (the equivalent of being moved to business class on an aeroplane – if you remember them), the rain was torrential. And so the legend grew.

Our relationship of Swithun will change later this year, or perhaps early in 2021, when the Channel Islands move from our 500-year-old relationship with the Bishops of Winchester to Salisbury. There, we will meet new saints: St Osmund, a Norman, who accompanied William in his invasion of England, became Bishop of Salisbury and had a major influence of the development of mediaeval English worship (and whose feast days comes immediately after St Swithun's Day, on 16 July); St Aldhelm, the scholar Bishop of Sherborne; and the ascetic St Edmund, a canon of Salisbury and later Archbishop of Canterbury, known for his uncompromising stand in favour of good discipline in both civil and ecclesial government.

But more important for us are the Channel Islands saints: Sampson, the patron saint of Guernsey, whom we remember on 28 July; Magloire, of Sark; Tugual, of Herm; Vignalis, associated with Alderney (though possibly a mythical character); and Helier, the patron saint of Jersey. The Guernsey bailiwick saints were all Celts, whereas Helier was a Belgian; perhaps another reason for the subtly different culture of the two bailiwicks.

These patron saints of the Channel Islands and Wessex are men. Whilst perhaps we may not be surprised at this, it is remarkable how many women had huge local significance in other parts of England. Wessex also produced St Cuthburga, the austere Abbess of Wimborne in Dorset. We can look to Werburgh in Chester; Etheldreda, abbess in Ely and founder of Ely Cathedral; and Frideswide, abbess of the double (that is for both men and women) monastery in Oxford. And perhaps the most significant of all, Hilda, Abbess of Whitby in north Yorkshire, one of the most remarkable and respected women of her time, in the seventh century.

All these people have left a mark. Their memory has endured over the centuries. They have made a deep impression in the places where they lived and worked. So many centuries later, it is difficult to state precisely what that impression might be, except that each of them pointed people to Jesus and were remembered for having done that,

with courage and tenacity. They were men and women who worked and prayed tirelessly to establish and build up the Kingdom of God.

Which takes us to today's gospel reading.

The overall message of the parable of the weeds is that evil and injustice will attempt to thwart the Kingdom's development and challenge the basic nature that God wills for humanity. But it will not, in the end, succeed. God will determine a time of harvest when the good and the evil, justice and injustice, are finally separated.

Like the saints of every age, we are called to stand up for what is good and right and just. We are called by God to be his people. But at the same time we have to live with the imperfections of this world, to live with both the good and the evil, and to be very careful about any pre-harvest judgement as to which is which. The danger, which we know too well from ourselves and our experience, is that the distinction between the two can sometimes be so very fine: how easy it is to tip over from one side to the other. God alone will make that final judgement as to which is which.