

Sermon 19 July 2026 - A Question of Allegiance

Readings: Isaiah 44:6-8, Romans 8:12-25, Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

What, if anything, struck you as today's readings were being read? For me the initial reaction was these readings all look forward to the coming of the 'end of the age', and the offer of hope for us to be with God for the rest of eternity. A follow-up recognition was that they also speak of where our allegiances lie – who or what is it that we are serving, as it is this that will ultimately determine where we find ourselves for the age of eternity. A sobering thought, to say the least. So how did I get to this point of thinking, and how might this impact the way we seek to live our lives in the here and now?

Set within a broader section of looking forward to the coming of the future Kingdom of God, our reading from Isaiah has a court room/ trial setting, where God, through the prophet, lays out the case for God/ Yahweh to be acknowledged as the ultimate God and therefore the true king of Israel – above the Kings that God had allowed them to have and to live under. "Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me. Who has announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us what is yet to be. You are my witnesses! Is there any other god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one.

In today's Epistle reading, Paul is setting up an argument comparing life based on worldly values (the flesh) with life based on Godly/ scriptural values (the Spirit), where the former leads to spiritual death, and the latter to spiritual life. The clear inference is that we have to choose between one or the other – coming back to a question of our allegiance. Paul's use of the phrase "children of God" is a reference to the people of Israel, hence the understanding that we have the opportunity to enter into relationship with God via spiritual adoption as opposed to physical descendancy as occurred for those of direct Jewish heritage. This brings to mind the Jesus' parables where he refers to those of gentile origins being grafted into the vine of God's people. Either way the end result is a future hope of eternity with God. Where we end up is again a choice we have to make, highlighting the importance of our decisions and actions.

Our gospel reading for today forms part of the third of five major discourses recorded by Matthew, which focuses on ways in which disciples of Jesus, as members of the Kingdom of God, were called to lives of separation from those living 'in the world'. While they were presented as private disclosures to Jesus' disciples, they have relevance to us today as we seek to align ourselves as modern disciples of Jesus, and so are guided by how Jesus called his disciples to live. The important thing I took from this parable of the weeds and the wheat was the fact that both were allowed to co-exist alongside each other, with separation only taking place at harvest time, or allegorically the end of the age. I take the parable as pointing to the many different mindsets or cultural and philosophical perspectives we are presented with on a day to day basis, which we have to navigate our way through as we seek to identify those of value that will lead us into a closer relationship with God. If we are not discerning about which ones we adopt and take on, we face the risk that our faith in God will be overwhelmed and crowded out by unhealthy and unhelpful influences. For any of you who may be interested in knowing the detail of the verses that were left out of the middle of today's gospel reading, these relate to the parable of the mustard seed and parable of the yeast. Both of these point to the way even small influences can have a significant impact on overall outcomes, which has relevance when considering the effect of even small compromises in how we respond to any 'weed-type' forces that might seek to enter into our lives.

I also see a direct link between the message of this parable of the weeds and the wheat and the parable of the different soils presented in last week's gospel reading, which Karl spoke to so well. For anyone who missed last week's sermon or hasn't had a chance to review it since then, I would encourage you to check it out via the links on the new St Paul's website. The gist of this parable was that we are each represented by one of four soil types – those who immediately reject any call for God's involvement in our lives, those who initially seek to follow God, but give up when things start to get tough, those where faith becomes crowded

out by other competing interests and belief systems, and those who are in 'boots and all' and follow in the ways of Christ no matter what. The implied message I take from this parable is that for each soil-type scenario, the outcome hinges around how the individual responded to the situation they found themselves in, or in other words the decisions they made and where their true allegiances were placed. Those that followed the forces of the world ended up falling away from their new-found faith, while those who kept focused on the promises of God and the hope laid out before them bore fruit far in excess to the efforts they put in. The key to a successful outcome was where they choose to put their focus and their allegiance.

Lest anyone think I am trying to make more out of this focus on the importance of allegiances than is supported by today's readings, my thesis is that this is a question that is woven into the entire fabric of the Biblical story, right from the creation narrative and the temptation of Adam and Eve, through the lives of the Old Testament patriarchs, such as when Abraham kept faith that God would provide a sacrifice so he didn't have to offer up his only son Isaac, or where the Israelites were given the choice between following the laws laid out by Moses which would lead to life, or follow the ways of their surrounding culture, which would lead to their loss of fellowship with God. This idea of choosing which way people should follow flows through the pronouncements of all the prophets and into the teachings of Jesus and then into the first century apostles as they pronounced the coming of God's Kingdom throughout the known world.

What I see identified by all these Biblical writers is the danger of dualism, coming from trying to incorporate aspects of contemporary culture into their lives of faith, in ways that end up diluting the commands of God and leaving them muddled and confused. I particularly think of the message to the Church in Laodicea in Revelation 3, where dualism or lukewarmness has crept in and the people are condemned by God for trying to have a foot in both camps – "I know the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish that you were one or the other! But since you are like lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth!" Clearly not a desirable position to find oneself in.

Today, maybe more than in any other period of human history we live in a world full of competing ideas and world views, where the pressure seems to be to find ways to coexist together. One example of this which stands out for me at this point in the year is how we seek to respond to, and engage with, Matariki within our lives of faith. One thing I hadn't realised until Karl's sermon from last week, was the fact that this same constellation of the Pleiades which is used by Māori as a marker of the changing seasons, was also used in a similar fashion by the ancient Israelites, although with a different name. This would suggest it is legitimate to weave the season of Matariki, as a time for reflection on what has gone before, and the opportunities that lie ahead, into our regular rhythms of faith. The danger, as I see it however, lies in how we then respond to these times of reflection. If we were to embrace Matariki completely we could end up giving thanks to, or committing the future to stars and other spirit beings rather than to God, the maker of the heavens and the earth. We could end up worshipping the creation rather than the creator. This would place us at the risk of the dualism which we have already seen Scripture expressly warns us to watch out for.

So what might be some takeaways for us from our foray into today's allocated Scripture readings? Firstly, we need to remain aware of what is seeking for our attention and our adherence, especially those aspects of our culture that might not be based on Biblical values. Secondly, we should maintain our focus on Yahweh, the God revealed to us through Scripture. This is particularly poignant for today, given its designation as National Bible Sunday. We need to ensure we remain aligned to the pathways God calls us to as his followers and his people, remembering that as we are reminded in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, the decisions we make here on earth and the way we relate to others, will be a key determinant of our status when it comes to where we find ourselves in heaven.

So, let us close with the words of Moses to the people of Israel "Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Oh, that you would choose life." Amen.