Like the Archdeacon last week, I have chosen verses from this morning’s psalm as my text. The AD had excellent reasons for so doing: he wanted to preach about the need to apply our hearts and minds to the word of God, following the example of the psalmist. My reasons are less admirable: I have struggled to find a phrase from the gospel to encapsulate what I want to say. For today’s gospel, the parable of the wheat and the weeds (the wheat and the tares) is unequivocally eschatological; it’s about the Last Judgement. The Son of Man will send his angels to collect all causes of sin and evil-doers and he will throw them into the fiery furnace, where they will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Yet those of you who know me well will know that I am not a fire-and-brimstone sort of preacher; I tend to preach about the love of God and the grace which opens for all the way of everlasting life. So, what am I to do with this distinctly uncompromising text?

Today’s gospel reading follows in Matthew’s account directly from the parable of the sower that we heard last week. Like that parable, it uses a familiar agricultural image to convey its message. Both speak of sowing, seeds, and soil; both talk about the kingdom, and both mention the obstacle to its growth: namely the evil one, the devil. They testify to the arrival, in the end, of the good future that God has planned, but they show in different ways how the route from here to there is strewn with sin and unbelief. For both address the problems that arise when Jesus’s teaching fails to turn the hearts of his hearers to God. Just as the good seed (the children of the kingdom) can fail to thrive and bear fruit, so weeds (children of the evil one) can be sown among the good wheat of the kingdom. Good comes with the evil. The two parables thus have a single meaning. The difference is that the parable of the sower focuses on human responsibility for the final outcome, whereas that of the wheat and the weeds blames the devil for his part in ensuring a negative response.

The disciples, you remember, struggled with the parable of the sower. They asked Jesus to tell the tale again to explain what he meant about seed sown on different sorts of ground. Today’s is outwardly more straightforward in that it talks about ordinary agricultural practice, describing a situation to which we can readily relate. In any cornfield there will inevitably be some weeds. Is it better to spray the field regularly with weed-killer or to try – as the slaves of the householder were so keen to do – to pull up the weeds while they are growing, so that they don’t stifle the good
wheat? The householder points out the problem with the second solution: the risk of pulling up the good crop with the weeds.

Some translations identify the bad seed that is sown, *zizania*, as darnel, an annual grass with long slender bristles that looks, when first sprouted, very much like wheat. Darnel has strong roots, but it must ultimately be separated from the good grain because its seeds are poisonous. How did that weed, the poisonous crop, get into the wheat field in the first place? Here we encounter the issue at the heart of this parable. Some weeds are inevitable, but this particular householder was plagued with them because ‘while he was asleep the man’s enemy came and sowed *zizania*, weeds, among the wheat and went away again’. This is not about human weakness. We cannot parallel this story with the culpable sleeping of the foolish virgins or the idle slaves who were not ready at the coming of the bridegroom. The householder was enjoying the normal sleep of the righteous during the night-time, when there was no labour to be done in the field. Yet it was during the night that the enemy came to spoil his crop.

How we interpret the parable depends on how much weight we want to put on the person of the enemy. It’s not so much that the weeds threaten the growth of the wheat (as the thistles smothered the seed in the parable of the sower), for we know that in end a good crop was harvested. Rather, the presence of the weeds growing beside the wheat causes substantial inconvenience to the householder, and potentially more trouble to his slaves (who will have to do the extra work to solve the problem). The slaves urged him to pull the weeds up. But the householder recommended doing nothing. Until the time of the harvest, he advocated that the evil sown by the enemy should simply be endured, not resisted. We may note with interest that all the evil-doer had to do was to sow his seeds of darnel among the good seed and then go away, leaving the weeds to do his dirty work for him; if the slaves had had their way, indeed, he could have ensured the ruination of the better part of the whole crop. By his inactivity in just leaving the weeds to grow beside the wheat, the householder saved his harvest.

Is this then an argument for passivity in the face of evil? Turn this into an argument about today’s world and does it mean that the answer to foreign powers who invade another’s sovereign territory, to radicalised young people who use bombs and knives to protest about what they see as the derelictions of western society, or to the shockingly large number of people in our own midst alleged to enjoy looking at pictures of children being abused, is simply to sit by and do nothing. No; of course not. The moral answer to evil and wrong-doing is not passive endurance but action, and action that obviously includes prosecuting and punishing those proven to have committed crimes and, in desperate circumstances, going to war against our enemies (or the enemies of our allies). Yet this parable seems to be saying that such
just actions against evil doing do not necessarily serve to make the world a better place. Resistance to evil is salvifically ineffective, it doesn’t necessarily bring salvation.

There’s a bigger argument in this parable, however, and that lies in a single word, the imperative that the householder uses when he tells the slaves to leave the weeds alone, to let them grow together. *Aphete*, from *aphiemi*, to send away, let go, leave, permit, dismiss or to forgive (in the sense of debts, trespasses, sins etc). It is the verb found in the Lord’s prayer in Greek: forgive, *apes*, us our sins (our trespasses), as we forgive those that sin against us. Forgive the weeds, the householder says; don’t tackle the evil sown in the field, or the evil found in the world with its own tools. Instead, leave the evil ones alone; respond to their ill-doing with forgiveness. For that is what Christ did for us on the cross: he did not threaten his enemies with the fiery furnace, he forgave them, ‘*Aphes*’ he said, one last time (Luke 23: 44), ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’ Christ suffered for our sins so that we all might be forgiven, that we might all enjoy eternal life, shining like the sun in the kingdom of the Father.

Why did Christ suffer and die for us? St Paul explained in our second reading. Jesus took our sins upon himself in order that we might be free. Free, as Paul wrote, from creation’s bondage to decay, that is to death, in order that we might obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom 8: 20-21). In our old life, under the old dispensation of the law, we were in debt to all the things of the world and the flesh; we had to fulfil all the demands of earthly life in the expectation that it would bring us nothing, in the end, but death. But now that we belong to God body and soul, now that (as Paul explained in an earlier chapter of the same letter) we have through baptism chosen life over death, we belong to God. And God does not take payment like a creditor; rather as a sign of the magnitude of his love for us, he gives more than we could ever imagine. He makes us his children, and gives us life, a life that we share equally with his Son. As Paul explained, ‘we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heir with Christ, if in fact we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him’.

If Paul is right, how can we reconcile his message of hope with the warning end of our gospel. Are we saved in hope, with Paul, among the righteous ‘who shine like the sun in the Father’s kingdom’; or are we cast into the outer darkness, weeping, and wailing, and gnashing our teeth? Jesus told this second parable about sowing the good seed of the children of the kingdom to remind his disciples (who failed to hear his meaning the first time), and so to teach us, that we are not wholly passive agents in this process: we are responsible for our own actions. Our own sins. It is easy to place blame for wrong-doing elsewhere, to find excuses, others to accuse. But just as we have a moral responsibility to speak out against the evil done by others, so we need to name our own wrong-doing and to assume individual moral responsibility for our own sins – and ask for God’s forgiveness.
'Search me out, O God, and know my heart', the psalmist wrote; 'try me and examine my thoughts. See if there is any way of wickedness in me.' It is only when we search out our own hearts, when we confess and repent of our own ill-doing, that we open ourselves to the full grace of God's forgiveness, the magnitude of his love that will lead us into the way everlasting. Jesus' suffering and death, resurrection, and ascension, will reconcile the world to himself; they will bring not just to his disciples, but to all people forgiveness and the hope of sharing in his glory. Forgive us our trespasses, Lord; deliver us from evil; and lead us in the way everlasting. Amen