

BIBLICAL RESOURCES



Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23 (22); Ephesians 2:13-18; Mark 6:30-34

Jesus said: “Come away to a deserted place and rest a while”

Mark 6:30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 31 He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. 32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. 33 Now many saw them going and recognised them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 34 As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Anyone involved in ministry today will have no problem recognising the difficult balance of personal prayer and attending to the needs of those we serve.

At this point, the lectionary skips the story of the death of John the Baptist. It is, nevertheless, very instructive that that story is inserted between the sending of the twelve in Mk 6:7-13 and the return of the twelve in Mk 6:30. Rejection (as noted explicitly) and even martyrdom (as implied in the case of the Baptist) are to be expected.

KIND OF WRITING

There are two stories here: (i) the necessary refreshment of the disciples and (ii) the needs of those they minister to.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Moses spoke to the LORD, saying, “Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep without a shepherd.” So the LORD said to Moses, “Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and

lay your hand upon him; have him stand before Eleazar the priest and all the congregation. (Num 27:15–19)

When he had come to the king, the king said to him, “Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall I refrain?” He answered, “Go up and triumph; they will be given into your hand.” But the king said to him, “How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?” Then Micaiah said, “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep without a shepherd; and the Lord said, ‘These have no master; let each one go home in peace.’” The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy anything favourable about me, but only disaster?” (2 Chr 18:14–17)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Jesus as teacher

On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! (Mark 6:2)

Jesus as doer of mighty deeds

They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the

Thought for the day

Our current culture of distraction seems to privilege busy-ness (the modern heresy of “activism”). It is, of course, an illusion to confuse hyperactivity with productivity or, even worse, administration with ministry. When people involved in ministry go on retreat, the first two days are often spent sleeping—itsself instructive! It is often only when we stop that we realise how much we are in need of rest and refreshment. While there is always more to be done, we have to choose how to use our time. An approach of “selective neglect” is not without its value, as recommended in *The Joy of the Gospel*.

Prayer

God of life and abundance, you call us to be bearers of the living and joy-filled Gospel. Help us to recognise our own need of time with you and refreshment in spirit. Amen! Let it be!

mute to speak.” (Mark 7:37)

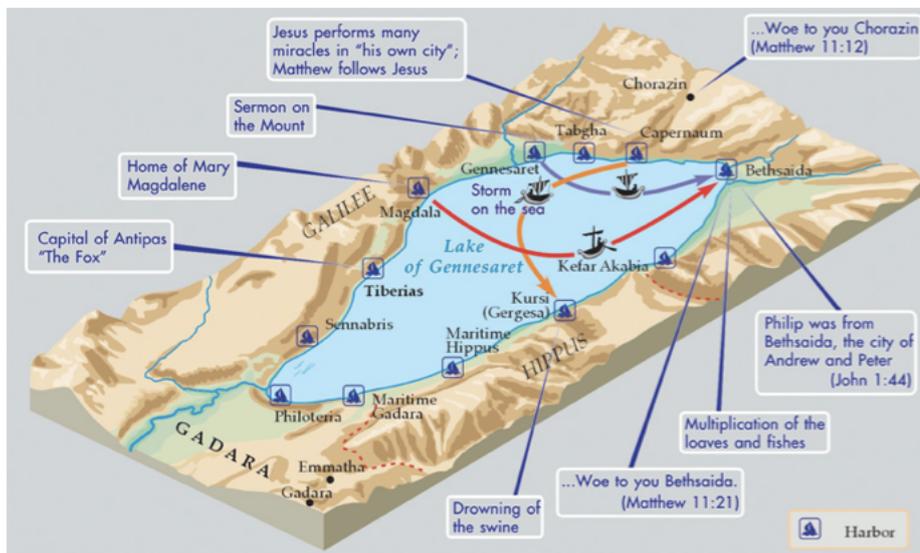
Jesus as a person of prayer

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. (Mark 1:35–36)

After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray. (Mark 6:46)

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. (Mark 9:2)





While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. (Mark 14:22–27)

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." (Mark 14:32)

Jesus responding to people's needs

And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons. (Mark 1:36–39)

ST PAUL

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at

work in us, but life in you. (2 Cor 4:7–12)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 30 Jesus is always the centre of the "gathering" in this Gospel: Mark 2:2; 4:1; 5:21; 6:30; 7:1. Being sent is an action in the Gospel and so the noun "apostle" is rare in Mark (here and in 3:14), whereas the verb is frequent (x20). "To report" is the same as "to announce", as in: *But Jesus refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you."* (Mark 5:19) Teaching is the characteristic activity of Jesus and of his disciples (Mark 1:21–22; 2:13; 4:1–2; 6:2, 6, 30, 34; 7:7; 8:31; 9:31; 10:1; 11:17; 12:14, 35; 14:49).

Verse 31 Jesus' own practice of and teaching on prayer may be found in this Gospel (Mark 1:35; 6:46; 11:24–25; 12:40; 13:18; 14:32, 35, 38–39), even if not as extensively as in Luke.

Verse 32 To be by themselves or "in private" is a characteristic of Mark's narrative (Mark 4:34; 6:31–32; 7:33; 9:2, 28; 13:3; translations vary). It reflects the inner teaching or training of the disciples. The disadvantage of the desert place triggers the next story (v. 35).

Intriguingly, the next time "rest" is mentioned is also in a context of prayer: *He came a third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners."* (Mark 14:41) However, rest is no longer appropriate or even possible by then.

Verse 33 The criss-crossing of the lake is a feature of Mark's story. The accompanying map above gives an idea. Chasing after Jesus also happens earlier in

Mark 1:36–39 (see picture). Running to Jesus also occurs elsewhere: *When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him.* (Mark 5:6)

Verse 34 The verb "to have compassion" is used only in relation to Jesus in this Gospel. *Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!"* (Mark 1:41) *"I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat."* (Mark 8:2) *It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us."* (Mark 9:22)

The verb means to have pity or to feel sympathy. The related noun means the inward parts of the body but it not infrequently carries a metaphorical meaning (heart, love, affection).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The apostles reported to Jesus all that they had done and taught. Perhaps you have had the experience of being able to check in with somebody and share an experience. What was that like for you?
2. Jesus saw that the apostles needed to rest and eat. What has been your experience of finding a restful place after a busy day? What kind of nourishment have you found necessary in order to live with energy and enthusiasm? What have these insights taught you about life?
3. When Jesus saw the crowd, he recognised their need and reached out to them. Who has been a Jesus person for you, someone who recognised your need and reached out to you? For whom have you been a Jesus person in that way?
4. It sometimes can be difficult to strike a balance between responding to the needs of others and meeting our need for rest and nourishment. What has helped you to keep the balance right?

PRAYER

Compassionate God, from far and near you gather your Church into one.

Safeguard the unity of your flock through the teaching of Christ the Shepherd that all your scattered children may find in him the guidance and nourishment that they seek.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ your Son, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

He came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near

Eph. 2:11 *So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— 12 remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*

Eph 2:13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. 15 He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. 17 So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18 for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading today—couched in rich metaphorical language—reflects on the core events that gave us new life in Christ, his death and resurrection, the sending of the Spirit, our access to the Father. Although this is not Paul in his own words, nevertheless it is faithful to his great insights from Galatians and Romans. Certain significant words will speak: brought near, peace, reconcile are all words of great power.

As always, the teaching resonates in a particular context. Unless the people in church are informed that the two “groups” are Jews and Gentiles—historically separated—they won’t really understand what is at stake here.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The notes for the previous Sunday reflected on Ephesians in general, touching on context, authorship and the like. This particular reading informs us that the communities to which the letter was writing were composed of Jews and Gentiles. The special election of Israel had always set the Israelites apart and

this division was expressed and sustained chiefly by the “ritual laws,” that is circumcision, dietary (kosher) regulations, and the observance of the Sabbath. In general, these laws stem from the great exile in Babylon when the risk of assimilation with the surrounding culture was greatest. This risk continued in succeeding centuries—Hellenistic culture was no less seductive—and the laws were a defensive ring to keep Gentiles out. Jesus broke some of the laws touching diet and purity but his contact with Gentiles was minimal. As a result, the early Church had to struggle over how much of that inheritance to keep and how much to jettison. (The teaching in Mark 7:19 looks like a retrojection, anchoring and clarifying such freedom in a Jesus story, composed later.)

Paul in Galatians reflects very acutely on this and, in his opinion, Jesus’ solidarity with the excluded on the cross ultimately means that the distinction and separation of Jews and Gentiles no longer makes sense. As a result, the ritual laws are no longer needed at all. Paul comments sharply: *I do not set aside God’s grace, because if righteousness could come through the law, then Christ died for nothing!* (Gal 2:21) Ephesians 2:13-18 represents an accurate reception of this authentic Pauline teaching.

KIND OF WRITING

The excerpt chosen is part of a longer persuasion in Eph 2:11-22.

- A. Gentiles in Christ, with an emphasis on how they were “before” (11-13)
- B. The change effected by Christ (14-18)
- A. Gentiles in Christ, with an emphasis on how they are “after” (19-22)

RELATED PASSAGES

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became

a servant of this gospel. (Col 1:21–23)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 13 “Far off” summarises the synthesis in vv. 11-12. “Near” is also used in v.17. Cf. Col 2:21-22 above.

Verse 14 The start is important: *Jesus himself*, in his person, is our peace. Here, the writer reflects authentic Pauline teaching. Jesus, on the cross, identified in his person with the excluded, thus disclosing God’s fellowship with human fragility and mortality. In Jesus, God extended his compassionate love to all without distinction (to use a Pauline phrase).

Verse 15 Paul himself would not have spoken so bluntly about the *abolition* of the law (cf. *Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.* Rom 3:31). Law must mean here the ritual law only. The new creation in Christ does come from Paul (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). The one new humanity (lit. “man”) includes everyone.

Verse 16 In this view, Jesus’ death is not a propitiatory sacrifice (as in the Anselmian doctrine) but rather a communion sacrifice (in the sense of an act of fellowship or solidarity). By going beyond the ethnic limits of the earlier covenant, God has extended grace to all.

Verse 17 In Greek, “proclaimed” is literally “gospelled”, taking us directly back to the teaching of Jesus. Both groups are named and identified.

Verse 18 This is real Pauline teaching: through the Spirit of *Jesus*, we all have access to the Father. Thus the shared experience of the Spirit is the empirical guarantee of our reconciliation in Christ. Cf. *For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!”* (Rom 8:15)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. How have I know the peace of reconciliation in Christ? Does it affect how I live?
2. Complete fellowship, without distinction, is always a challenge. Where do I experience that?

PRAYER

Father, you have brought together in Christ, so that there is no distinction but all are one in need and in grace. Help us to embrace others in Christ and to welcome all as Christ himself. Amen.

And this is his name “The Lord is our righteousness”

Jer. 23:1 Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. 2 Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. 3 Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. 4 I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer; or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

Jer. 23:5 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 6 In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Jeremiah ministered before and during the great exile in Babylon. When it did finally occur, the exile triggered deep reflection on *why* it had come about and *how* was God using this event for the good of his people. In part, there was realisation that lack of fidelity was one cause; in particular, lack of fidelity with the leadership, priests and kings.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Along with Isaiah (all three of them!) and Ezekiel, Jeremiah is one of the major prophets. The book we now have is an extraordinary literary and theological achievement. The first part of the book re-enacts the dismantling of tribal structures, cultic institutions and symbolic systems. The telling is full of haunting imagery and deep feeling. A world has simply collapsed. How to cope with the massive wreckage of a cherished world?

The second part of the book is devoted to a deep theology of suffering as the basis for the construction of new possibilities and restoration after the immense suffering of deportation. Given our situation of cultural “exile” at the moment, we have much to learn from Jeremiah.

Our section comes from chapter 23, that is, from the section attacking the leaders. Any resemblance to current church “recession” is not to be overlooked.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a blunt oracle of judgment, combining blame and hope. The text is in three parts: 1-4 (the exile), 5-6 (promise to David), 7-8 (the new Exodus).

The full “woe” section should take us through v.8, to expressions of hope: Therefore, the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, “As the Lord lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of Egypt,” but “As the Lord lives who brought out and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them.” Then they shall live in their own land. (Jeremiah 23:7-8)

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Jeremiah 21:12; 22:3; 25:34-36; 33:12; 33:14-16; 50:6.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Woe or alas opens the passage. Shepherd is a regular image for the king in the Ancient Near East. The metaphor is sustained: scatter and pasture. This first part of the woe establishes blame and then goes on to pronounce sentence.

Verse 2 They have not attended to their flock, so God himself will attend (!) to them. In part, the issue is that the flock does not belong to the shepherds but rather to God (plenty to think about here!). These very shepherds have forsaken their proper duties.

Verse 3 God himself will take charge and three moments are imagined: return from exile, new shepherds and then a future new Davidic king. To be fruitful and multiply echoes the creation story and the promises to the patriarchs. The ingathering of Israel was a great theme of the exile and formed part of Jesus’ own vision much later. In the omitted vv. 7-8, there is an echo of the exodus, a theme much more developed in Isaiah 40-48.

Verse 4 The effects of the good shepherds are contrasted with the effects of

the bad ones: fear, dismay and loss.

Verse 5 A rich description of a future kingdom is given. From Zech 3:8 and 6:12 we know the “branch” was a messianic title. One of the leaders of the eventual return was a descendant of David called Zerubbabel, a name which means “branch (!) of Babylon.”

Verse 6 There is a further illuminating word game in this verse. The last king of Judah before the Exile was Zedekiah, which means “YHWH is my righteousness” (*Tzidkiyah*). The future king, the branch of David, will be called YHWH *Tzidkenu*, YHWH is our righteousness, which reverses the name Zedekiah. Thus, a complete reversal is promised. The full meaning of the new name is “The Lord is our legitimate ruler.”

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The reading points to failure in leadership and no doubt we can make the contemporary connections. Yet, if the word is to touch us, we have to let it address us and in some sense we are all called to shepherds, with a duty of care.

2. The emphasis on fear, dismay and loss invites a reflection on my own experience of these things, not only as a human being but also as a believer. The current context of church can also be fearful and dismaying. And yet, hope keeps us going, the hope that new life may come of all the wreckage around us.

3. The faithfulness of God is portrayed concretely in the Bible through his promise to the house of David. We can make this personal: in all the twists and turns of life, when have I felt God with me? With the 20-20 vision of hindsight, can I see the footprints of God in the sand?

PRAYER

Great Shepherd of your flock, you search for us when we are lost, you cheer us when we are dismayed, you lift our hearts when we are afraid.

Come to us now and show yourself a true shepherd, seeking the lost and leading us home, that we may rejoice always in your care for us.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23 (22); Ephesians 2:13-18; Mark 6:30-34

READINGS 1 AND 3

Jeremiah prepares for the reading explicitly because of the metaphor of shepherding. The self-giving exemplified by Jesus and copied by his disciples is the very antonym of the carelessness and self-seeking of those so-called shepherds whose actions triggered the destruction of the Judah and caused the deportation of the people.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 23 is the perfect response. It may be worth pointing out that while Psalm 23 is technically a psalm of trust, the underlying rhythm, the *qinah*, is actually that of lament. Thus, trust arises not from equanimity but from distress.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Jeremiah 23:1-6

This passage was written when the political leadership failed abjectly, leading to a catastrophic collapse of institutions. As we hear the message of condemnation, perhaps we need to be open as well to the message of hope.

Second reading

Ephesians 2:13-18

The separation mentioned in this reading was originally the division between Jews and non-Jews. Listen carefully and you will hear the seeds of a new vision of humanity, "whose common father is the same."

Gospel

Mark 6:30-34

Anyone in a caring role will understand this story. Do carers need to care for themselves? Yes, of course. At the same time, the cry of those in need is insistent and penetrating.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 23 July

St Brigid of Sweden

Galatians 2:19-20

The reading is chosen for feast of St

Brigid, who had mystical experiences. A more accurate translation of the reading would be as follows: *For through the law I died to the law so that I may live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* (Gal 2:19-20)

John 15:1-8

The discourse of the vine invites us all to recognised ourselves as the branches, all recipients of the grace of Christ.

Tuesday 24 July

St Declan, bishop

Micah 7:14-15, 18-20

This is a prayer to God as our shepherd, a very beautiful prayer which gradually unfolds the identity of God. As we call on God to be faithful, we commit ourselves too to be faithful to our faithful God. Matthew 12:46-50

Who is it that really belongs to Jesus? According to this gospel, blood relationship and even being just a neighbour are a hindrance (cf. *When his family heard this they went out to restrain him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."* (Mark 3:21). Instead, a new family is envisaged based on faith.

Wednesday 25 July

St James, apostle

2 Corinthians 4:7-15

The reading is special for the feast. The Corinthians blew cold and hot when it came to St Paul. Once more, in this reading he defends himself, and reveals something of the inner motivation, the inner person, his sense of apostleship.

Matthew 20:20-28

Again especially chosen for the feast, this reading tells a familiar and instructive tale with one interesting difference. In Mark, it is James and John who make the blunder. In Matthew, to spare the blushes of the emerging leadership, this "role" is assigned to their mother! In any case, the message is untouched: leadership in the faith community is costly service, modelled on Jesus' own service.

Thursday 26 July

Sts Joachim and Anne, parents of the BVM

Jeremiah 2:1-3, 7-8, 12-13

Our reading is full of pathos. God himself tells the story of his choice of Israel, in very poetic language. At the same time, God's expresses his consternation at the ways things have turned out. It is all expressed in a very human way, but a deep truth stands at the heart of it all.

Matthew 13:10-17

Our reading is a challenge to us to listen and to see, so that we may grasp fully the message of Jesus.

(In Mark, this scene was part of his messianic secret. Matthew struggles to re-interpret Mark. Matthew's adjustments are instructive: (i) mysteries becomes plural, more in accord with the OT; (ii) understanding is a grace and a gift; (iii) "good" students know how to listen and will be given more; (iv) Matthew changes Mark's purpose clause (in order that) to a simply "because"; (v) finally, Matthew gives the full quotation from Isaiah 6:9-11, but omits the last damning words from Mark: so they may not repent and be forgiven.)

Friday 27 July

Jeremiah 3:14-17

At the time of Jeremiah, the religious leadership had failed and so the prophet speaks God's promise of fidelity.

Matthew 13:18-23

As you hear the parable, try to listen without the "explanation" and see what it says to you. The first level of meaning is really the abundance and sheer "unstoppability" of the kingdom.

Saturday 28 July

Jeremiah 7:1-11

A tough speech from Jeremiah, calling on people not to delude themselves with false assurances of piety. And yet...God will stay with them.

Matthew 13:24-30

The parable may well be directed to Matthew's church at the time of writing. In a community commanded to perfection, the temptation to expel the less than perfect may have been strong. The message here is that it is none your business...who knows how people may change and grow?