

Sermon for Sunday 19th July

Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

Not Paralysing Nail Biting but Divine Risk

Over the last few months our readings have taken us through St Matthew's Gospel Sunday by Sunday. They have given us not only insights into Christ's teaching, and the new Christian community being formed at the time of Matthew himself, but also promises and principles for our current day, to help us face the crisis of Covid 19 and, in looking beyond that, at the future shape of the church.

Perhaps more than any other Gospel, Matthew deals with practical, human problems, the kind of problems confronted every day by individual Christians and by local communities. Matters like anger, sexual behaviour, hypocrisy, church discipline and the power of possessions all figure prominently in the gospel narrative. We might not always like what the text says, but we cannot argue that Matthew is abstract or that the Gospel avoids routine down-to-earth issues.

Such is the case with today's reading – Jesus' parable of the weeds among the wheat and the resulting interpretation. It reminds me of the story of the retired gardener, not too frequent in church, who was tending his front garden when the local vicar happened to walk by. The vicar, seeing an opportunity to drop one of his pearls of wisdom, remarked to the gardener "Isn't it wonderful how God makes things grow?" To which the quick-witted gardener replied "Yes, but you should have seen the mess before I started to tidy it up!"

As someone who has very few green fingers, I find it amazing how easily weeds spring up unwanted, whilst the things I plant and nurture with all the love and care that I can muster, often wilt and die. You do not need to be a professional gardener to know about weeds. If you have ever tended flowers or vegetables you will know that weeds appear overnight, creeping across the soil, tangling new shoots and choking delicate blooms. They can resist regular spraying, sturdy hoes and angry fingers. Weeds can even have a deceptive beauty, with many a gardener ruefully realising that they pulled up a plant and not the weed.

There are weeds in our own lives too – all the obstacles, setback, mistakes and disappointments that wear us down with discouragement. We might wonder why it is. How come that which is beautiful and life-giving seems so fleeting and temporary? Our first instinct is to act just like the servants in today's gospel; pull the weeds and be rid of them! But the Gospel warns us: "not so fast! Be sure to look at the whole picture". Perhaps it is that these more human weeds deepen our appreciation for the flowers. When we see evil, we appreciate goodness. Perhaps too weeds of human frailty prompt us to try and grow and stand taller, and to develop good roots so strong that we can take them into the very ground of our being.

Last week's reading and this are parables about the church – about the field that God plants in the hope of gaining a rich harvest of blessing for himself and for the world that he has made. Who has not wrestled with the paradoxical character of a congregation, where committed members with ideas about how the church ought to be and could grow, side by side with those who are indifferent or who apparently are motivated by self-interest? Who has not wanted to be rid of bad apples that spoil the fruit basket?

My concern, as we slowly begin to open our churches again is that we start to regain control and take up the mantle of being gatekeepers once again. The open 'out there' church shown live or through video on a Sunday morning, or open Zoom meetings, is suddenly replaced by the happy little club meeting within closed doors once more.

The pictures of this parable would be clear and familiar to a Palestinian audience. Tares were one of the curses against which a farmer had to labour. They were a weed called darnel. In their early stages the tares so closely resembled the wheat that it was impossible to distinguish the one from the other. However when both had produced a head, it was easy to distinguish them, but by that time their roots were so intertwined that the tares could not be weeded out without tearing the wheat out with them.

The wheat and tares could not be safely separate when both were growing, but in the end, they would need to be separated because the grain of the darnel is slightly poisonous. It causes sickness and even a small amount has a bitter and unpleasant taste. So, in the end the wheat and tares were separated by hand.

Surely this is one of the most practical parables Jesus ever told. It teaches us that there is always a hostile power in the world, seeking and waiting to destroy the good seed. Our experience is that both kinds of influence act upon our lives, the influence which helps the seed of God's word to flourish and grow and the influence which seeks to destroy the good seed before it can produce fruit at all. The first lesson we must learn is the need to be always on our guard.

Secondly, it teaches us how hard it is to distinguish between those who are in the Kingdom and those who are not. A person may appear to be good and may in fact be bad and a person may appear to be bad and yet may be good. We are much too quick to classify people and label them without knowing all the facts.

I would guess that the two predominant reasons people give for not being Christian and for not associating with or attending church are that people in the church are just as bad as everyone else in the world – that in general they are hypocrites – and in particular – there are thieves, liars, gossips, cheats, snobs and adulterers amongst them. And that the whole idea of a good God is clearly ridiculous – because if God was so good why would God allow so much evil to exist in the world.

That's where some people are at. They are upset – and I think rightly so – that not everything is perfect. Like the farmer's servants in today's parable they are concerned that there are weeds amongst the wheat, concerned that the harvest might not turn out right, concerned that the good purpose of their master might fail.

At least some are – the rest are just critical – they do not understand or want to understand the things of God. There is almost no explaining why God allows the devil to cast his horrid seeds in God's garden but the word that God gives his servants is very clear – do not disturb it! In this passage we find the slaves of the householder, in their enthusiasm saying, 'Then do you want us to gather them up?' It's a natural response perhaps, but there is a final rebuke to any position of authority which we as the church might think is ours. Do not try to pluck it out because if we do, we are going to wreck everything, we are going to develop an eye of judgement and while we might be right in that judgement, we may end up doing wrong.

Walking back into our churches, we are also in danger of walking back into a number of controversies which we have managed to forget over the last few months – controversies about inclusion and exclusion, about our theology around women's ministry, about not wanting our nice

Sunday morning being disturbed by those not like us, about our expectations on those who serve us, including the clergy, the flower arrangers, the rota's and the minutiae of church life.

How quick we are to judge! I recall visiting someone who happened to be weeding in their front garden. She was lamenting how in her efforts to weed she was pulling up bulbs!

In this passage God says, 'leave it to me', concentrate on the things which really matter. We are called to be simply the good soil in the world, to be a welcoming, not an alienating community, accepting the people who God brings into our midst, because they are good seed which God plants. The weeds will be burned at the time of harvest – and all of us will have a hand in it – we will see justice done. The weed will perish, and the wheat will be stored in the granary of heaven.

The parable teaches us not to be so quick in our judgements. In the end a person will be judged, not by any single act, or stage in their life, but by their whole life. I therefore hope that from now on we can go forward as a much more accepting church, open to more than those who have come to us so far, willing to embrace change and difference, and delighting in all those God is sending, whatever shape, size, age, ethnicity, sexuality or social status they be. Church discipline and order has its place, but it must be tempered with the long view, which leaves ultimate judgement in the hands of the ultimate judge.

Judgements can so often be 'out there' and involve other people. The important thing about the passage is that it involves you and me. The parable confronts us with the final judgement, and with the fact that that there is a degree of uncertainty for all of us. Where do I stand in terms of the coming separation? - is the question Jesus' parable calls for word and deed, and a consistency between our motivations and our actions.

So it is that in this strange system of divine agriculture, in this field that is so mixed and cluttered with weeds as well as good seed, I am glad that God waits a while and that he tells his servants to hold back. You see, every now and then I get this idea that perhaps I am acting like one of those weeds, and I know for sure I have been a weed in the past – that somethings I have done or failed to do were not of God. Knowing that and knowing what God has done and can do with me and for me, when I let him, I'm rather relieved to have the weeding put off to the end of time.

In that, the message is one of hope. We are the good seed that God has planted, provided we are allowing the other seeds which God has planted their rightful place too and we will find our own fulfilment as we grow into the person God means us to be, not as we trample over others.

As for the church, in the light of the coming judgement, now is not a time of, as one commentary put it 'paralysing nail-biting' but a time of risk, of taking joyful ventures and of discovering what is really valuable. It is a time for boldness and of persistence in pursuit of the coming reign of God. It is a time for bold welcome, and generous inclusivity because whatever the future, the gospel truth is that the Son of man who sends his angels to effect judgement is the one who on earth forgave sinners freely, who suffered at the hands of betrayers and who confirms for us all that God's gracious promise can be trusted.