

## **The parable of the weeds – Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 (Cathedral)**

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our creator, redeemer and sustainer. “Let anyone with ears, listen!”

I knew there’d be an opportunity one day for me to bring the countryside and farming into the city! Not all of you will know that when I retired from ministry in six rural parishes in Warwickshire, I became Chaplain for a Christian charity - the Farming Community Network. So I know quite a lot about the challenges faced by farmers today: climate change, government bureaucracy, rural crime, the impact of global events, finances, lack of a national food security strategy, loneliness, relationship problems, poor mental health – the list could go on. But here in the Gospel we hear about one particular problem – weeds!

Weeds are pernicious – they compete for light, they choke the other plants by twisting around their stems, they suck up their nutrients and their water, they invade their space, they introduce viruses into the crop, and they contaminate the harvest. One of the worst weeds to have in a field of wheat is black grass – it can reduce the yield of crops by 35 – 40%. So this is serious.

Jesus loved to use farming as settings for his parables – his audience would have understood what he was getting at. Here in this parable, as Jesus explains, the farmer represents Jesus himself, the field is the world, the good wheat seeds are the children of God while the weeds are those people *deliberately* sown by the devil into the world to disrupt us. And the harvest is what happens when Jesus returns on judgement day – when his angels will sort out the good wheat into the barn, and the weeds into the fire.

The devil deliberately plants the weeds among the wheat to cause destruction. We know there’s evil in the world, however we name it, so we need to remember that wherever the people of God are doing his work, the enemy is also there, deliberately trying to undermine our efforts, sowing the seeds of discontent and fear, anger and hatred, frustration and despair. The servants know the damage that the weeds can cause and want to rush out immediately to destroy them. They think they know which they are, which should be left in and which should be dug out. But I think we need to be a bit more careful than that before judging: like the field where both the healthy wheat and the destructive weeds are growing together, our own community is a mixed bag of these two kinds of disciples. We’re all aware of those “weed-like” opponents of Jesus – the malicious, the unkind, the uncaring; those with their persistent criticism, challenges and hostility. We’re all wary of those who have a different opinion from our own. We like to think we know who is accepted by God and who isn’t. At least here at the Cathedral, I think we’ve realised that it’s *not* our job to draw up the specifications regarding the wideness of God’s mercy – all

are welcome and loved here. It's not up to us to rush out to eradicate the weeds and settle the problem of who is in and who is out of God's Kingdom. This is a warning to guard against excluding others and passing judgement.

God calls for patience. He knows that pulling out the weeds will damage the rest of the crop. He wants the believers and unbelievers, the righteous and the wicked, to live together until the end times. I expect it's because he knows there's a bit of "weedyness" in all of us – Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans that we are all slaves to sin and if we keep on following it, we will all perish. We know what we're called to be and do – but sometimes it feels like our own lives – souls, hearts and minds – have been infested with weeds. None of us is totally good seed NOR bad seed. We all have good bits and bad bits. We need to think of ourselves and each other as a mixture of wheat and weeds, of holy and unholy, as potentially fruitful or destructive. But God wants to give us all a chance to thrive and flourish and bear fruit, through the power of the Holy Spirit. He wants us to grow stronger in our faith so we are better at resisting the infestation of weeds. He gives us the opportunity to turn our lives around. Thank goodness God is waiting for the harvest, the end times, before we are judged (but do remember, we don't know when that is, it could be anytime so we do need to be ready).

Maybe thinking of ourselves like this, a mixture of good and bad, could help us understand a bit more about why God allows suffering and evil. I wonder how often you see the news about all the dreadful things going on in the world and wish God would just come and fix it all? Why doesn't God act now to stop all the evil – the wars, the earthquakes, the violence, the abuse, the injustice? That's what the servants in today's parable want to happen: "let's just go out now and pull up all the weeds that are spoiling the crop and then we'll have a perfect field of wheat" they think. Wouldn't that seem a simple and sensible thing to do? But it's not that straightforward. The Kingdom of God isn't yet fully established, judgement day hasn't arrived. So where would God draw the line today? It wouldn't require just putting an end to all those terrible events we hear about in the news headlines – but also about dealing with all those things in our own lives that we know are wrong. We're not just talking about mass murderers, drug barons, people traffickers, but about all those "little" sins we all commit. Maybe we could use the wisdom of St. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13, to see how we measure up. We're doing wrong when we're impatient, unkind, envious, boastful or arrogant. When we insist on our own way, are irritable, rude or resentful – that's the devil at work in us. The problem with *all* sin – however insignificant we consider it to be - is that it has consequences – it hurts not just us, it hurts other people and it hurts God's creation – but most of all, it spoils our relationship with God.

There are no degrees of sin – sin is sin – whoever commits it or whatever it is. (I once heard an analogy that helped me understand this – about catching a bus – it doesn't matter if you get to the bus stop an hour after the bus has left or you arrive just as it's disappearing around the corner – whichever it is, the outcome is the same - you have missed the bus! And so it is with sin – *whatever* you have done wrong, it is sin.) If God were to respond every time any of us sin, we would be instantly judged and punished. If everyone who sinned was uprooted and removed, no-one would remain. We would all stand condemned were it not for the amazing merciful love of God who has redeemed us and set us free.

So what can we do in the meantime? Do we just sit by and accept things as they are and let all the evil and suffering carry on around us, waiting for God to act? Do we ignore the appeals to stand up for justice in Palestine and Gaza? Do we take no notice when we overhear an inappropriate conversation with a child, or witness someone being bullied? We know it's not our place to judge. But that doesn't give us an excuse to stand by and do nothing. If we know someone is doing wrong, or failing to do right, we should address it, otherwise it will spread, like the weeds, and infest other parts of the field. We must persevere in doing God's work, showing mercy and kindness, forgiveness and love. We need to reflect and embody the love and glory of God; we need to attend to that which increases our potential for holiness – so that we reveal the God who is supremely loving, wise, holy, just and true.

This parable is about God's grace, the devil's plan and God's ultimate victory. It acknowledges the reality of evil in the world and its pernicious nature. It addresses themes of waiting and judgement, gathering and separation, preservation and destruction. We know that God is fully aware of what the devil is up to and what he's going to do about it. Meanwhile, he tolerates a world of good and bad, faith and faithlessness, triumph and tragedy. He is preoared to let all things grow together until the harvest. In his own time God will act to judge and redeem the world, sorting out the wheat from the weeds, the good from the evil, based on the fruit we have borne, how we model Jesus in our lives in response to God's redeeming love for us. Waiting for the harvest takes patience, faith and hope. Meanwhile, the Kingdom can grow in us, around us and even sometimes through us. This harvest – this judgement – is the ultimate good news. In a world where seeds of hatred and injustice are sown, this parable affirms God is still in charge and everything will be put right. Evil will not be part of God's new creation. This is about God's Kingdom built on salvation and forgiveness of sins, built for you and for me. "Let anyone with ears, listen!" Amen.