

Sermon - kingdom of heaven: weeds and wheat

Based on 2 Corinthians 6.2-12 and Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

The parable of the tares

- Chapter 13 of Matthew's Gospel has a number of parables in it, all focused on the idea of the kingdom of God.
- The one for today is given a few different names, depending on the version of the Bible.
- In the version we normally use, the New Revised Standard Version, the weeds are merely that - weeds.
- However, it can be helpful to pick up on the King James Version, which uses the word *tares*.
- Tares, also known as *darnel*, is a type of ryegrass (not rye) which is initially indistinguishable from wheat when growing.
- It can be a real problem when the seeds are accidentally harvested together with wheat, because the resulting flour from the tares and wheat can make people feel inebriated and nauseous, and can even cause death.
- Sowing darnel among the wheat of an enemy was considered to be so unethical that Roman law prohibited it.
- So the situation that Jesus describes in his parable was a real one that his audience could easily relate to.
- And the solution is fairly obvious, because most people would have understood that once weeds of any kind had started growing amongst the wheat, their roots would have become entwined with the roots of the wheat.
- So if one pulled up the growing weeds, one would have effectively uprooted the wheat as well.

The deeper meaning

- Nevertheless, those listening to Jesus would have understood that he was using this story to describe something deeper.
- When you have a rabbi - a religious teacher - giving some obvious farming instruction, then it should make one stop and reflect on what the instruction might be representing.
- Indeed, his disciples ask him to explain the significance that he gives it, because they haven't been able to figure it out for themselves.
- Now Jesus didn't appear to be in the habit of unpacking all his parables, and even the ones that he did, he only did so after the disciples had had time to reflect on and think about ways the story might apply to human nature, and to relationships between people and with God.
- However, in Matthew's account we read Jesus' interpretation almost straight after, which makes it difficult for us to see other possibilities in interpreting it.
- Jesus provides a straightforward interpretation:
- The field is the world, the sower is himself, the good seed are the children of God's kingdom, and the weeds that produce useless or even poisonous seed are those who live counter to the way of God.

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The end of the age

- The next part of his interpretation can be easily misunderstood, depending on how we understand the phrase *'the end of the age'* (NRSV, Matthew 13.19).
- If we think that it means a specific point in time, in the future, when there might be a cataclysmic event that will bring about the end of all humankind, then it makes this parable less accessible for me.
- Because it means that in the year 3030, or 7070, or perhaps a million years from now, then God's kingdom will finally be purified, and all those who produce fruit - or seed - of no benefit will finally be excluded from God's kingdom.
- Well, if that's only going to happen in a million years time - or even in only another two thousand years time - then that's not going to make any difference as far as my life is concerned.
- But Jesus often used the phrase *'end of the age'* to refer to things that happened only a short while later.
- For example, Jesus spent an age in the tomb, between crucifixion and resurrection.
- It certainly felt like an age for the bereft disciples.
- And I don't know about you, but the COVID-19 regulations feel like they've been going on for ages.
- So, in a sense, the harvest Jesus describes is both going to happen, and is also already happening, even now.

Not static, but dynamic

- One of the clues to this is how Jesus introduces the parable.
- He starts by saying: *'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to ...'* (NRSV, Matthew 13.24)
- And it's very easy to assume that this 'kingdom of heaven' is a static concept - sort of like:
 - we're alive on earth now, and then we die, and we go to some other place called heaven, and they're completely separate from each other both in time and space.
- But that makes no sense, because Jesus teaches us to pray for God's kingdom to come on earth, here and now, and in John's Gospel, Jesus says:

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. (NRSV, John 5.24)
- 'Eternal life', 'kingdom of heaven', 'kingdom of God' - these are all about experiencing them and participating in them here and now.
- So when Jesus says: *'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to ...'*, he doesn't just mean the end part of the story, at the end of the harvest.
- No - he means the whole of the story.
- The kingdom of heaven can be compared to:
 - someone sowing good seed,
 - AND an enemy sowing weeds,
 - AND the seeds sprouting and growing together,
 - AND the reapers bundling up the weeds after they have grown and burning them,

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- AND the reapers gathering the wheat into the barn.
- The kingdom of heaven is not static, but dynamic.
- It plays itself out across the whole story.
- Which I think is both amazing and exciting.
- The kingdom of heaven is not just a particular time and place, but it is a dynamic process, that we participate in, and that Jesus participates in, and that can be infiltrated and affected by evil forces, but in which divine forces also ultimately prevail.

Participating in the story now

- Now this understanding suddenly makes the parable a lot more meaningful for my life, in the here and now.
1. Because it means, to me, that Jesus *has* been sowing the good seed, and he *is* sowing the good seed, and he *will* be sowing the good seed.
 2. And likewise that the evil one has been sowing weeds, and is sowing weeds, and will be sowing weeds.
 3. And that the seeds have been growing, are growing, and will be growing.
 4. And that the reaping and so on has been taking place, is taking place, and will be taking place.

This means:

1. that we can be alert to where Jesus has already sown his Word in the hearts of people, and maybe where we can still participate in that sowing in the future - what we call mission.
2. And we can be alert to where we can participate in growing ourselves, and helping others to grow, as we progress in maturing in the faith - what we call discipling, or growing as disciples of Jesus.
3. And at the same time we need to be alert to those amongst us - obviously in the wider world, but also within church communities - who appear to be beneficial wheat but who are actually detrimental weeds, but who we also need to be considerate about how we engage with.
4. And we can also be alert to how God's angels are enacting the harvest, and how we might participate with them, and attend to whether we are producing good or bad seed ourselves.

Discriminating between people?

- At this point I want to start connecting the parable with an aspect of the passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church.
- And the part of the parable that Jesus doesn't interpret.
- The part where Jesus says in the parable:

'The slaves said to the householder, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest.' (NRSV, Matthew 13.28-30)

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- This is important, because if the kingdom of heaven is about Jesus sowing good seed now, and the evil one sowing bad seed now, and the seeds sprouting and growing now, then it's also about letting the children of the kingdom and the children of the evil one actually co-existing together, here and now.
- In former times the church would excommunicate people - but this was like pulling up weeds and uprooting wheat at the same time.
- And sometimes the church got it wrong and later realised that they had been pulling up wheat, thinking it was weed.
- In Jesus' parable, the owner of the field tells his workers not to try to discriminate between them.

Wielding weapons of righteousness

- And for me, this ties in directly with one of the aspects that Paul describes, when he talks about all the different kinds of hardships that he has endured in order to be able to share Jesus with them.
- And not only hardships, but also intentional patience, kindness, love and so on.
- And he includes a curious phrase:
with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left (NRSV, 2 Corinthians 6.7)
- 'The weapons of righteousness' - or right-wise-ness, as I find easier to understand.
- To be right-wise is to be deliberately aligned rightly with God - to be in the Way of God.
- To be facing, as one lives one's daily life, the source of love, and light, and life.
- When I am living in the most loving way possible, to all I engage with, then I am being right-wise.
- When I am living in the most truthful, light-bearing way possible, then I am being right-wise.
- When I am living in the most life-nurturing way possible, then I am being right-wise.
- And Paul sees that being deliberately right-wise like this is the way to engage and do battle with evil, and those who perpetrate it.
'the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left'
- When one is being wholly right-wise, then there is no place for a destructive weapon in one's armoury.

Everyone to be valued and welcomed

- At the end of interpreting his parable Jesus says:
'Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.'
- Because the righteous cannot battle with evil by trying to pull up the weeds.
- It is too damaging, to everyone.
- What we are called to do is to love everyone, and to engage in the truth with everyone, and to enact God's blessing of life towards everyone.
- Over the years I have learnt not to exclude anyone from the church, or to exclude anyone from being able to receive God's blessing.

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- Because some of the plants that I thought were weeds turned out to be wheat, and some of the wheat turned out to be weeds.
- And by being loving, and light-bearing, and life-nurturing towards every person, both in the church community and outside it, it also gives God the opportunity to perhaps transform a weed into wheat, and a sinner into a saint.
- Because this too, is what the kingdom of heaven is like.