

**To weed or not to weed?**- that is the question  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them. *Hamlet A3 S1*

Follows Parable of the sower – last week's reading- The 4 types of ground

In the middle of this parable are two more- the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast. After these 2 is the explanation of the parable of the wheat and the tares followed by a similar parable that is relevant to Eden called the parable of the net in which the good fish are kept and the by-catch thrown back into the lake as rubbish. Unlike some of the other parables the parable of the tares is only Matthew who quotes this one. But this one must be important because before Jesus told his disciples the explanation he said "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world."

***So why do we need to talk about the parable. Didn't Jesus explain it in today's reading. It's one of the few parables that is explained.***

Does it need explaining? I see one of the roles of the teacher in church to try to understand the passage, whatever it is, in its context.

***What was the audience for this parable? What was its context?***

In this case Jesus, the disciples and the crowds almost 2,000 years ago and in the fertile crescent. One point when I think about that is that there were many people listening to Jesus who thought there was no afterlife. But there were many others who also had this world view. When you have that view you can't rely on God's eventual judgement. If you believe in God, as most people did, then you need a divine smiting of drought, earthquake or disease to punish. Almost instant Karma. If you don't believe in a fair God then you have to take the law and punishment into your own hands. Another point about Jesus' time was that in the pharisaic world the responsibility of the religious authorities was to uphold holiness by laws, rituals and especially inclusions and exclusions. Isn't Jesus speaking a strong point against mere mortals, no matter what their positions, labourers or husbandman, are not to be making the decisions about personal or community holiness?

***Who makes the rules on holiness in our modern world?***

Another job of the teacher in church is to make the ages-old passages that may have been relevant at the time that they were written to be relevant for today.

So it brings up the subject of how much do we, as Christians, or even as humans, take on the role of judging or punishing others. We often do as Christians or as a society and set them aside in gaols even though evidence shows our current punishment regime is ineffective at best and counterproductive most of the time.

This passage stands very strongly besides the passage

- King James Bible *And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?*

- English Standard Version *Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?*

***What would you answer to people who ask these questions?***

"How come people in the church don't behave more like Christ?"

And outsiders observe - "Why aren't people in the church and between denominations able to get along peacefully and lovingly?"

"Why is it that the way people treat each other in the church so often seems so petty?"

"You'd think the church might be one place where you'd experience the unconditional love and encouragement that Jesus spoke about, so how can people behave badly?"

So what is Jesus telling us about the sort of people we are and the sort of situation we face in this church and in every church?

- The first thing he is telling us is that the presence of maliciousness, pettiness and nastiness in every congregation of his church is inevitable. He gives one reason in this parable, but it is not the only one. The reason he gives is that where the Messiah sows good seed, the Satan will be sure to be trying to sabotage it. The Satan always reserves his best efforts for the places where love and peace and justice are most threatening to break out, so the more a church endeavours to follow Jesus, the more the Satan will seek to infiltrate them with the seeds of bitterness and violent rivalry.
- Another reason is that places that hold the promise of healing and renewal will attract those who are the most damaged and unstable. While it is certainly true that the Christian church promises to be a place in which people can grow into the ways of love and mercy and justice, if the church is also fulfilling its mission of drawing in more of the unloved victims of our society, then it can expect to also be constantly finding within itself the passive or not-so-passive bitterness and rage that are going to be present in those who have been battered and smashed. But before we start looking around and trying to categorise each other, the even more important truth is that there is something of each of these things in all of us. We each come here with wounds of the past. Margaret Moon, a former minister here, described it as 'each one having their own bucket of tears'. I come here with parts of me willing to respond to the call of Christ, and parts of me resisting at every turn, but trying to keep my resistance hidden. But of course, being human, we always find it much more recognisable and offensive in other people than in ourselves!

We want to take action to purge the community, to make it holy, to make room for the good wheat of love and mercy and justice to grow and flourish without being challenged and choked by these noxious weeds. On the surface, this seems well-motivated. It is our passion for justice and holiness, our passion for love, isn't it? And so we look to Jesus for advice on how to go about this weeding which we would do in his name and for his sake. But Jesus says "Don't! Don't even try!"

There are three reasons implied in what he says. One is that any weeding that is to be done is not our job, but God's. Our job is to be good wheat, not to be the gardener. Leave the gardening to God and get on with growing.

- Third reason - is the likelihood of being completely mistaken. The weed described in the story is a common grass, Darnel, that looks a lot like wheat. The good wheat and the weed are often difficult to distinguish from one another. And given that we are all something of a mixture of each, no wonder. The violence of our attempts to weed out evil is almost inevitably misdirected. The people who killed Jesus fervently believed that they were purging their community of the one who would infect their community with evil and lawlessness. Any attempts to weed out the problem people or problem things will actually uproot and harm the innocent. No matter how well-motivated and appropriately targeted we think our violence is, the emergence of new violence always does as much harm to the innocent as to the deserving. Violence always begets violence, and so perpetuates itself. Our attempts to destroy evil in our midst become an evil in and of themselves.

There is an amazing little thing in this passage that we don't notice unless we can read it in Greek. It is the Greek word at the start of the farmer's instruction: "Let the wheat and the weeds grow together." It is that word "let" or "permit" or "allow". The same Greek word means "forgive". This is not just a

passive ignoring of the problem. It is an active naming and forgiving of it. It's the same word as in 'forgive us our debts or sins' as in the Lord's Prayer. We are not called to pretend that the wheat and the weeds are no different. We are not called to refrain from calling for repentance and change. We *are* called to refrain from attacking what we think might be weeds. And most importantly, we are called to actively forgive and to suffer the ongoing presence of those whose attitudes or actions seem to threaten our beliefs or wellbeing. We are being told that the means to purge the community of malice and pettiness and nastiness is not through the violence of weeding, but through the grace of courageous forgiving and accepting.

What looks like a weed may just be an immature wheat stalk, and even if it is a weed, you'll probably kill or wound a couple of good wheat stalks in your attempts to pull it out. Forgive. Tolerate. Let your only experience of evil or of violence being in suffering it, not in inflicting it.

Loving the sinner and hating the sin means holding people accountable for their actions, but always being willing to forgive. It means affirming the good in people instead of always looking for the bad, and of all places, this ought to be true in the church because it is seldom true in the world.

At the end of all this series of parables in Matt 13

- The parable of the sower and the 4 types of ground
- The parable of the wheat and the tares
- The mustard seed that grows into a large tree
- The parable of the yeast
- The parable of the unproductive tree that the husbandman can't decide whether to cut out or not
- The pearl of great price that the merchant sells all to buy.
- The parable of the net and the fish are sorted

in Matthew 13 is the strange summary from Jesus

Jesus said to them, "Have you understood all these things?"

They answered him, "Yes, Lord."

He said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been made a disciple in the Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who is a householder, who brings out of his treasure new and old things."

*How could this be a summary of what the disciples were meant to understand?*

People need to be encouraged and supported while they find their feet and then find their wings.

**Patience as one of the most important qualities of a church if it is to find a place and sense of belonging in the community. The church needs to be welcoming those on a journey and not judging or rejecting.**

**Isn't that one way of reading the parable.**

Let's allow the weeds and the wheat to grow together until the harvest, and when the harvest comes, we may find that we have a whole lot more wheat and a whole lot less weeds than we thought.