

19 July 2020. Parable of the Weeds. Matt. 13 24-30, 36-43.

In Matthew's Gospel this parable follows the one about the Sower which we looked at last week, and is in turn followed by the parable of the Mustard Seed. Jesus speaks about seeds and plants and wheat and weeds and fields and trees because he wants to make it clear that the Kingdom of God is right there in front of people and it needs to be protected and nurtured.

Today most of us are much more detached from the source of our food supply – it is easy to forget how significant these parables were to the Palestinian people who heard them from Jesus. They were not just quaint stories that provide pictures to colour-in at Sunday Schools or sketches for Drama Groups to perform – they were a matter of life and death. No crops, no food, no money, no way to survive. The peasant farmer who suffered a bad harvest, whether from birds eating the seed, a lack of rain, the sun scorching the seedlings, or the weeds choking them, he would slide further and further into debt slavery and never recover.

This story of the wheat and the weeds is about both reality and hope. In the parable of the sower Jesus has just said that when seed grows in good soil it produces a crop 30, 60, even 100 times what had been sown. To have this sort of return would have been miraculous, and would certainly have made a huge difference to the life of the farmer concerned – certainly there would have been no issue of getting into debt any more.

Here we have a man who has sown good seed into good soil, and everyone concerned has gone home to rest. I wonder how often it actually happened that an enemy came along and sowed weeds in your field while you slept? It sounds unlikely – but evidently there *was* a statute about sowing something called 'darnel' – which looks very much like wheat when it is young, but can later be distinguished, although its roots are stronger than wheat and can be difficult to

disentangle – to sow darnel as an act of revenge was punishable under Roman Law – so it must actually have happened around that time. And darnel was useful as a fuel when wood was scarce, hence the image of it being separated and thrown into the fiery furnace.

Just how much of the *explanation* of the parable comes from Jesus and how much is Matthew's later attempt at applying his words to the situation in the early church at the time he wrote his Gospel is an interesting question. And is it about trying to create the perfect *church* community, or is it about behaviour in the *wider world*? It is certainly saying don't be too hasty to judge who is wheat and who are weeds – let God decide when he is ready. But does that mean we should just shrug our shoulders about difficulties and problems, or even wrong-doing and evil, either in the church or in the world? Well, one short parable can't answer all the world's problems – perhaps it's about keeping a sense of proportion. Churches and other communities need to be ever adaptable, and yes, try to encourage holiness – but care is needed about who decides what's best in the way of behaviour, or rules, or attitudes.

Everyone reads the Gospel according to the space they occupy – their culture, their lifestyle, their upbringing, their place and time. It is impossible to do otherwise. So these parables of agricultural life will have different things to say to different people – and if some have ears but do not hear, then often it is not the obscurity of the word we hear, but the prevailing world view in which we live that prevents our understanding.

But in all the parables there is hope and patience. This parable of the wheat and weeds is followed by the one about the mustard seed – we never know what might grow from the smallest and most insignificant of beginnings. We can only *plant* seeds, we can't *make* them grow, only God can do that. And even with mustard-seed sized faith, anything might happen!