

Be patient gardeners

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

In this section of Matthews's gospel we are hearing a series of parables about the Kingdom of God, that great message Jesus proclaimed and embodied and that all people are invited to enter and build. Last week we considered that marvellous parable of God the sower, who sows the seed of the Kingdom all around. Some seed falls on the path, some on rocky ground, some amongst the thorns and all these seeds come to nothing. But some fall on good soil and produce an abundant and even miraculous harvest. In the great story of the Kingdom that is chapter one. Today we hear chapter two. This time the sower sows the good seed but an enemy comes later and sows poisonous seeds that grow into weeds. Wheat and weeds grow together. The fruits of the good seed and the fruits of the bad seed are in the same field. The workers ask the master, "What will we do?"

Indeed what will we do? All around the world we can see that good and evil exist side by side. At last years retreat at the monastery at Galong I decided to climb the hill in the distance where there was a life size crucifix. It was about a 2-hour walk return. It looked pretty straightforward. A bit of climb at the end but more or less just a matter of putting one foot in front of the other—or so I thought. I set out with noble visions of praying as I went on the journey and sitting at the foot of the cross to contemplate the wonder of creation. I am such a spiritual romantic! The first 10 minutes were fine but then it all got very messy and painful. All the paddocks were literally full with a veritable forest of Scotch thistle; a nasty weed with sharp spikes that fanned out from large leaves and stalks. Many of the plants were as high as my shoulders. I had to push my way through, battling and cursing as I went—so much for peaceful prayer. It was a nightmare of a walk and I was crying tears of frustration and pain. If I could have called down the wrath of God to burn those thistles I would have not cared a hoot for any native plant or animal that was lurking in the undergrowth. I spent a bit of time saying to God, "What is this?" "This is ridiculous!" "Swear, curse, swear, etc."

One of our natural responses in the face of what we perceive to be evil, injustice and wrong is to blame God. Some people decide that a good and powerful God simply can't exist. If such a being did exist surely it would do something about evil and suffering? Surely such a God would root out evil and make the world a better place?

However this neat solution is not as straightforward as it sounds. As Tom Wright puts it, "would people really like it if God were to rule the world directly and immediately, so that our every thought and action were weighed, and instantly judged and if necessary punished, in the scales of his absolute holiness?" Wouldn't we all be up the proverbial creek without a paddle, bundled up with the weeds and discarded? God might as well call the whole thing off right now. But this set of parables is so much more nuanced than our assumptions about how God should act and our superficial judgements about good and evil.

At the heart of this parable is the nature of the wheat and the weed. Commentators have pointed out that the weeds in the story are darnel (*lolium temelentum*). When they are young plants they look like wheat, but as they mature their seeds become dark and are poisonous. The plants then look the same, almost identical. Initially it is not obvious which is which and there is a danger that in pulling up the darnel the worker will pull up wheat as well. And so the master counsels patience.

All these parables are about waiting and having patience. The farmer waits for the harvest time, the birds wait for the tiny mustard seed to grow into a large shrub, the woman baking bread must wait for the yeast to do its work until the dough is leavened. And God waits. God appears to give us plenty of opportunities to show good fruit in our lives. But we humans seem to find it so hard to wait. We are like those farm workers who want to get in there and sort the mess out and root out the weeds and for some reason we think we can infallibly tell the wheat from the weeds. That somehow we can look into the heart and soul of another human being and determine how they stand with God and what they should do. In Jesus day there were plenty of revolutionary groups who wanted to get in there and deal with the groups they thought were the problem. They wanted to fight against the Roman pagans on the one hand and backsliding Jews on the other. The world then as now is a world of them and us. One group or person is sure the other needs reform, is wrong, needs punishing and needs controlling.

You just have to think about family issues, your teenage kids and your relationship with your partner. Aren't we so sure at times that we are right? In our sense of rightness we try and manipulate and control. And even when we don't the sense of being right does not go away. We even couch it beneath a veneer of tolerance. We can hide our sense of rightness in a fog of piety. We forgive and have compassion and understanding for our partners, friends and family but underneath we still think they are wrong or on the wrong track. Really if they just listened to us and followed our advice wouldn't we all be so much happier? Don't you do that or am I the only one?

This might happen in our family but whole nations act out the "them and us", "you are wrong, I am right" paradigm endlessly. That's what the shadow side of nationalism is—an undifferentiated mob that thinks its way is better than anyone else's and that the other is the enemy. From wars to the treatment of refugees this is the sorry state we are in. Churches do this as well.

One the most appalling truths of the Rwandan genocide was that Christians turned against Christians. Priests and pastors turned against priests and pastors. A piece of correspondence from that time shows the scandal and evil. A group of Christian ministers wrote to their supervisor expressing fear in the face of the growing violence. The answer came back, simple and direct—"You must be eliminated. God no longer wants you". They were Tutsis. The supervisor was Hutu. We might think we are immune from such events in the western church yet the mechanism is still at work in us, even those that affirm the radical otherness of God, that passionately claim that God is above and beyond all human distinctions. The most carefully nuanced, inclusive, liberal thinking, balanced Christians will still assume that God is fundamentally on their side and not the side of the mad fundamentalists, or those misguided conservative evangelicals. If we could just convert them, change them or root them out, we could keep our field good and pure.

So where does that leave us? What are we to do as we look around at the weeds and the wheat? As we realize that it is actually almost impossible to tell which one is which? When we realize that both good and evil live side by side in our own hearts? I have three suggestions. The first two link back to the parable of last week. The last comes from this week's parable.

Firstly, do everything you can to cultivate the good soil of your soul. We need to deal with our attachments, our fears and resentments, that is get rid of our own weeds. We then need to fill up our lives with what is good and beautiful and true. We need to open our souls to the grace and goodness of God, connecting to God through prayer, meditation and communion. We need to pray for the gift of understanding so that our hearts will be changed and we will

then be able to change our behaviour. Friends work on yourself before you attempt to sort out anyone else, weeding their garden. That is what Paul's phrase, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" means.

Secondly, so that you do not fall into the trap of them and us and the whole judgmental violent scapegoating that can arise, even it is only of the passive—aggressive type; model your attitudes and actions on Jesus Christ. Desire what Christ desires, love, as he loves. For we will desire and we will desire what other human beings will desire and we will desire the wrong things. That is what sin is—misdirected love, misdirected desire. Instead of loving God beyond all else we love and desire our own will, our pride, our possessions and anything else first. We covet, long for what belongs to others, instead of longing for God above all else. Jesus shows us that the way to freedom for others and ourselves is through his love and loving just as he does. If we do this we can be sure that we loving in harmony with the God of all. In the end there is no they and we, only each individual soul at one with the other and God.

Thirdly and last, let God be the judge. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Plain in Luke's gospel, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven". This does not mean that we do not confront injustice and work to protect the innocent. This is not a formula for doing nothing in the face of destructive and damaging acts. But it clearly draws a boundary between God and us. Judgment about a person's ultimate fate does not belong to us. It belongs to God. When Bill Clinton was going through his crisis—mostly because the poor man desired all the wrong things—he was being condemned left, right and centre, by people of different faiths and no faith at all. However, Billy Graham remained his friend.

Billy was challenged by his fellow Christians, "brother, how can you support that man, a man who is obviously a sinner?" He replied, "Well, it is the Spirit's job to convict. It is God's job to judge and it is my job to love". Brothers and sisters, how about we let God sort out the weeds and the wheat and let us trust in his patience, mercy and goodness. Instead let us love as Christ loved us. Amen.