

# **Sermon on Sunday 19 July 2020**

## **by Melanie Seward**

### **The Parable of the Weeds**

*(Matthew 13: 24- 30, 36-43)*

What image does the 'Parable of the Weeds' leave in our heads? Do you remember the good, the bad or the ugly? Those who follow Christ and are his co-workers bringing in God's kingdom, those who reject Jesus and perpetuate evil in the world or the ugly monster with the gnashing teeth.

At first, the plot is straightforward, we run easily with the action. The owner of the field plants the seed and it seems to be growing splendidly. Then the weeds are noticed. How did they get there? By being planted by the enemy. No problem, the solution is to remove them. Let's leap in, take them out and burn them. This is, of course, exactly how many operate in life - and sometimes how we act or, perhaps, would like to act, even if we cannot. In life, we tend to label people very quickly - good and bad, beautiful and valuable or ugly and unpleasant, promotion material or weak and not very effective, faithful or lip server, conservative or Marxist, traditionalist or liberal, on the way to heaven or on the way to hell. No problem! Simply eliminate the unsafe, the unaccomplished, the unwanted and those 'not like us.'

But then the parable turns an unexpected corner, this is not the response required. And why? Because if we pull up the weeds, we will pull up the wheat as their roots have grown together and are intertwined. Now the weeds in the parable

were most likely Bearded Darnel. When it first begins to grow, it looks like wheat and so is impossible to identify. As the plants mature, the roots of wheat and darnel intertwine - at this point destroy one and you will destroy the other. However, separation is essential - bitter and mildly toxic, darnel will ensure that the bread flour produced is useless. And so in biblical times, the darnel seeds would have been removed after threshing when the seeds of the darnel and the wheat are still a different colour - the unwanted and rejected seeds would have been picked out by hand. So, the solution to the weeds is to wait until the time of the harvest and then everything can be sorted out without losing the crop of wheat.

The disciples didn't understand the parable and at their request Jesus provides an explanation, and Matthew gives us an account of this. The Sower of the Good Seed is Jesus - called the Son of Man. The field is the world. The Good Seed is the people of the kingdom - those who are receptive to the preaching of Jesus (they're the seed that falls in the good soil of the parable of The Sower). The weeds are the people who do not respond to Jesus and his message positively. The enemy is seen as the devil who planted the weeds. The Harvest is the end of the age when the Son of Man will come to bring judgement and establish God's kingdom in the fullest sense.

Now, this parable is set in a part of Matthew's Gospel that has a running theme of growing conflict and opposition to Jesus' message. For example, the religious leaders conspire to destroy Jesus after he heals the man with the withered hand (12. 14). Jesus heals a man described as being possessed by a demon and he is accused of working with the devil (12. 22-

32). Jesus uses the phrase 'offspring and vipers' (verse 34) and talks of 'an evil and adulterous nation' (verse 39). Yes, rather than pointing to other cultures or other populations being the problem, Jesus is saying the evil (or the weeds) is among the people of Israel itself. And so, when we think about what the parable means for people today - does it have a similar message - that we need to be aware of the temptations and flaws of the church? We cannot simply identify the Good Seed with those in the Church. And the same may be true - those outside the church cannot be simply labelled as 'darnel'.

**We** want to ask, 'Who are the true people of God?' and then we immediately jump to assessing others! We are, in effect, making the judgement. We take on God's role, instead of reflecting upon whether and how we might be weeds! And considering how, whilst growing in faith with others, we might wrap our roots around one another and have a responsibility to nurture one another taking care not to curtail the development of faith.

What is this parable about? We can read it as a feelgood message, looking forward to a future as one of the righteous shining in the sun. We can read it as a hellfire warning of the day of reckoning when those who insist on rejecting Jesus and perpetuating evil get their comeuppance. I'm going to lay my cards on the table and suggest this parable is **not** primarily about the division of us and them, about conflict, and the nature of the distinction between the sons of the kingdom and those who corrupt God's creation. It's about ourselves.

Jesus is pulling us up short, is really making us think hard and challenging us. In Matthew's account, it is evil personified as the devil that sows the troublesome seed, but... surely weeds grow on their own. Sure, they can be planted deliberately, but weeds will also grow of their own volition - when and where they can find space. Jesus tells the parable to provoke a response from his audience - whether we choose to respond or reject Jesus' message is our own free choice.

*Note that the parable does not end with the gnashing of teeth - a typical expression of eternal judgement. Neither does it end with the next sentence - with the righteous shining radiant in the sun. It is not about reward and punishment - this is not Jesus with a big stick threatening hell, it is Jesus engaged in a mission to save the world - he has not come to damn but to rescue.*

*Jesus asks: Are **you** with me? The waiting in a world where there is both wheat and darnel, not always very easily distinguished one from the other, is not waiting for reward or judgement. It is an active waiting in which we are continually asked to choose to live a kingdom life.*

Finally, the parable comes to an end with 'Let **anyone** with ears listen!' No-one is rejected or unwanted. Everything is designed to get us to pick up on the message, to choose love and life.



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