

Sermon on Sunday 19 July 2026

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader



The wheat and the tares

Reading: Matthew 13. 24–30

The parable of the wheat and the tares – or in modern expression, the wheat and the weeds.

I have deliberately left out the second half of the Gospel reading appointed for today on the Lectionary, because that is the passage when Jesus explains to his Disciples what the parable means. If you know that bit, try to forget it. The whole point of parables is that the listener is challenged to work out for themselves what it might mean for them.

Jesus told them another parable: "The Kingdom of heaven is like this. A man sowed good seed in his field. One night, when everyone was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. When the plants grew and the heads of grain began to form, then the weeds showed up. The man's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, it was good seed you sowed in your field; where did the weeds come from?' 'It was some enemy who did this,' he answered. 'Do you want us to go and pull up the weeds?' they asked him. 'No,' he answered, 'because as you gather the weeds you might pull up some of the wheat along with them. Let the wheat and the weeds both grow together until harvest. Then I will tell the harvest workers to pull up the weeds first, tie them in bundles and burn them, and then to gather in the wheat and put it in my barn.'"

Jesus tells this story to a large crowd on the shore of Lake Galilee. It's one of a series of parables we know as the 'Parables of the Kingdom', and in many translations they begin with the same words, 'The Kingdom of God is like this.' This one follows on from the well-known Parable of the Sower, and they all take scenes from local life – farming, fishing and baking, things the crowd would understand. Let's join that crowd in our mind's eye.

I wonder, did Jesus tell this story in response to a question from the crowd? 'Why, Jesus, does God allow

bad people to flourish among us, when is he going to come and put things right?’

What emotions did you feel as you heard about the good seed planted in the ground? The sudden appearance of the weeds? The farmer’s decision to wait, and the reason for it? And the promised outcome with the harvest in the barn and the weeds on the bonfire? Barn or burn!

Did you start with hope, and then move on to anger? Did you feel frustration, disappointment when there was no immediate, simple solution? Smug satisfaction when you heard the end of the story? Or did you possibly feel a little frisson of relief that time wasn’t up yet for the weeds?

It probably depends on whether you see yourself more as wheat or weed! Barn or burn!

Most of us don’t farm wheat, but a lot of us have gardens. I’m very conscious there will be lots of people here who know much more about horticulture than I do, but I’ll happily talk about the weeds I get to wrestle with in my garden.

Thistles - scratchy, tough, painful to the touch. Greedy on water and soil nutrients.

Nettles – soft but more subtly harmful, leaving a long-lasting irritation under the skin.

Ivy and bindweed – parasites, spreading all over the place and choking out trees and bushes.

Is there a bit of thistle in you? A bit of nettle, a bit of bindweed? Prickly, stinging, hurtful to those who come close to you? Happy to take up more than your fair share of the resources around us? Assertive, sharp-elbowed, ready to crowd out and push aside the people around you? Or do you just have those harmless but idle habits that distract you from the more productive things God would like you to be doing?

Wheat or weed? Who's heading for the bonfire? Barn or burn!

Maybe we need to freshen up our parable a bit more. As we have become ever more efficient at getting rid of unwanted plants from our cornfields and gardens, we have learned the hard way how much we need the diversity of our hedgerows and copses to support the insect life and birdlife that makes our whole food-chain work. Re-wilding is all the rage – even in our own gardens and churchyards, letting wildflowers and weeds grow to sustain our pollinators.

I need to be careful here with my parable. There is harmful behaviour in our world that God will not

condone or excuse. But, nevertheless, perhaps this parable can teach us one vital Christian lesson. We must not be judgmental. Where we only see weeds for the bonfire, God may see hope and grace and future fruitfulness. And when I say, 'Do not be judgmental', I don't just mean judgmental of others. God may see more potential in you and me than we see in ourselves.

As lovers of nature often remark, a weed is really just a flower in the wrong place. How much of the weed-like behaviour in our world – the anger and aggression, the struggle for status and material security, the prejudice and distrust of others - arises because people are in the wrong place? In places where they are not loved and nurtured, in places where they do not feel safe or free to be their true selves. In places where their hardest honest efforts seem to offer no prospect of fair reward. In places where they feel they are invisible, or have nothing to contribute. Wrong places. Is the goal of God's grace here to help people move to the right place? And what part can we play to help make all those 'wrong' places in our world 'right'.

Maybe there's yet another way to look at this. What if our place in the parable is not as weeds and wheat at all? What if we are the cornfield? Or a garden, or allotment, where good and fruitful plants grow alongside the embarrassing weeds? That certainly makes sense for my life, does it make sense for yours? It's not all or nothing. It's not barn or burn, after all.

Whether the good plants or the weeds get the upper hand depends very much on the gardener. Those words from St John's account of the resurrection slip into my mind, when Mary Magdalen fails to recognise the risen Lord: "Supposing Him to be the gardener". Perhaps, in a way she was right, at least for our version of the parable. Jesus, the gardener in the allotment of our lives. What can we say of him?

He will not be the kind of gardener that reaches straight away for the weedkiller!

He's not the harvester, at least not yet.

But he's the one who works with us season by season, year by year, hands in the dirt, keeping the weeds at bay and coaxing the best out of the soil of our lives. And when the promised harvest time comes, we will rejoice to be freed at last of whatever weeds are left, and see them consigned to the bonfire. All our good fruit we will carry to his eternal harvest banquet, where we will be all He made us to be, all He meant us to be.

Amen