



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

19 July 2020: Sunday Worship

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity

Romans 8:12–25, Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

The Revd Clare Hayns, College Chaplain

‘Wheat and Weeds’

Last week I asked my son to do a bit of weeding for me. The area in front of the house was looking ragged and was a mixture of lavender shrubs, dead or dying poppies, and crisp packets that had blown over the wall from St Aldates. He was very thorough and all the weeds and rubbish was removed very effectively. The trouble was he razed the whole bed to the ground. Everything was removed. The patch is now bare soil and so a trip to the garden centre is now needed to replace the lost plants.

Distinguishing between weeds and wheat, between good and evil, between what destroys and what brings life, is not easy to do, and lies at the heart of the parable we hear today.

As we open our newspapers, put on our TV’s to watch the news, and walk around our shops, we are faced with ample evidence that all is not right in our world. We meet young people who are anxious about the future, we see friends who are struggling with sickness, and we express frustration that those in charge are doing too much, or too little, to protect us, depending on our political viewpoint. It seems at times as if all we can see are weeds.

St Paul writes that the ‘whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now’¹. The image of a world groaning in pain feels very apt.

Those of us who have faith often have a hard time explaining, not just to other people, but also to ourselves, why there is such evil and suffering in the world. Perhaps we long for a time when all suffering and pain was banished and cast into the fire. Or at least from the Church? Or if that is too much to ask, from our own lives.

If we long for a nice, clear explanation of the problem of evil, then we don't get much help from Jesus' parable about weeds and the wheat. What we do get is a story that reminds us that the weeds are here to stay with a cautionary tale about trying to be weeders ourselves, and a message of hope for the future.

According to Jesus not even the kingdom of heaven is free of weeds. It may have started out that way but some point during the night an enemy came and planted seeds, *Lolium Tremuleum* to be exact, known as darnel. This was a noxious weed that is grown in Israel and looks very similar to wheat. The difference between darnel and real wheat is only evident when the plants mature as the ears of the real wheat are heavy and will droop, while the ears of the darnel stand up straight.

So the keen servants wanted to remove all the weeds are warned that they should hold back. They should let them grow together until the day when the reapers would gather it all together and separate it all out.

Why?

Firstly, because they could not be confident they could tell the difference.

The great Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn once put it: "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."²

William Barclay comments how this parable teaches us "how hard it is to distinguish between those who are in the Kingdom and those who are not." A person who appears to be one thing on the surface may well be something quite different on the inside. "We are much too quick to classify people and label them good or bad without knowing all the facts."³

The second reason why the servants are told not to put up all the weeds is because the roots are so intertwined it would be impossible to separate out without destroying the wheat. We know this in our own lives don't we? We get impatient with those we love; we continue to do what we know is harmful to us; we let our anger or selfishness get the better of us. But this is all mixed in with all that is good. We chose to call the family member who infuriates us; we use our own painful experience to support a friend; we overcome an addiction.

In the very act of rooting out evil, something of eternal value might also be damaged.

So, if we can't sort out the weeds in our own lives, what makes us think we can sort out the weeds from the wheat in others.

What does this parable tell us to do then?

It reminds us that God is the ultimate judge. That should be a relief to us. It's not up to us and we can leave the weeding to the angels at the end of time. Our job is to learn to live with weeds, and perhaps even to love them. By this I don't mean we are to do nothing, passively accepting all the sin and evil around us. It also doesn't mean putting up with people in our lives who bring destruction and pain, or situations which cause harm.

But it does mean that we can step back from being the ones that try and sort it all out.

Barbara Brown Taylor writing in *Bread of Angels* says:

'Our job, in a mixed field, is not to give ourselves to the enemy by devoting all our energy to the destruction of the weeds, but to mind our own business so to speak – our business being the reconciliation of the world to God through the practice of unshielded love. If we give ourselves to that, God will take care of the rest – the harvest, the reapers, the fire – all of it. Our job is to be wheat, to go on bearing witness to the one who planted us among those who seem to have been planted by someone else'⁴.

And this is the message of hope that Jesus gives us. The weeds are here to stay, but they will not be here for ever. The current creation that groans in labour pains will give way to a time of such glory, goodness and hope, where all that is evil will be separated out and what is left will 'shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father'⁵.

But for now our job is to bear witness to the one who planted us, wherever that might be. This requires great patience, self-control and, above all, love. And we can leave the weeding to God.

¹ Romans 8:22

² Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

³ <https://www.studydrive.net/commentaries/dsb/matthew-13.html>

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, Canterbury Press, page. 153

⁵ Matthew 13:43