

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Trinity

Gospel Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

Historians tell us that the type of weed which commonly affected cultivated fields in first century Galilee, looked just like wheat, (especially in its early growth), but could kill the wheat by overwhelming its roots. The ordinary folk ... listening to the parable we heard this morning ... would know only too well that having weeds in a field of wheat was a real problem ... and a threat.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds, tells us that there is real good in the world and it's there because God put it there. Then it tells us that there is real evil in the world.

So we are presented with the two great questions:

- The first we might call a **theological question** ... Where did the evil come from? The story says *an enemy did it*. So the evil in the world does *not* come from God but we learn that God (for some reason) permits evil in the world.
- The second question is more of an **ethical question** and is at the root of Jesus's teaching in this morning's reading. **Should we try to pull the weeds out?**

The clear (and perhaps surprising) answer is no, for two reasons. First, there's no way to pull the weeds out without pulling the wheat out too. Second, there is going to be a harvest and that will be the moment when God will sort everything out.

So this is how it is: ... in this present life ... there will always be good ... and there will always be evil ... and you simply can't expect to meet or experience good without evil being tangled up in it somewhere ...

In fact evil is never more likely to be present, than in people who think of themselves as unambiguously good.

Over the last two thousand years (though some have tried) we have come to realise that it's no use attempting to set up some Utopian Christian society, because either (at worst) we'd be overwhelmed in no time by the reality of the evil we'd tried so hard to ignore ... or ... at best we'd set ourselves apart in our own pure 'field of wheat' and leave the larger field of the world to its own largely unchallenged destiny.

The best we can hope for, as Christians, is not to think we are able to totally get rid of the evils of this world ... or even to avoid them ... but to live amid the reality of good and evil, and to try to discover the way to live a Christian life that expresses and achieves the greatest good and the least evil.

We have to understand the world as always being a place where great good and great evil are able to flourish.

So the parable of the wheat and the weeds can be seen (at least in some respects) as a lesson in humility because it takes great humility for us to realise that we are all part of a living cocktail of good and evil ... and that this humility is a huge improvement on the kind of naïveté that supposes evil can be killed with kindness ... or the arrogance that suggests it's possible to be a person or a community without evil.

Who among us (as individuals or communities) can hold ourselves up to be shining examples of goodness and virtue? Who among us can claim to live a life perfectly in tune with the teachings of Christ? Who among us would want the minute details of the way we live ... spend our money ... or talk about and act towards our fellow human beings held up to scrutiny?

Clearly, it would be foolishness to pretend that we could be all good. It would be foolishness to pretend that every action we ... (or our governments) take (to attempt to eradicate the evils of this world) ... always have the desired effect.

But that's not the end of the story here. The main point of the parable is not at the beginning where we find that the world is a mixture of good and evil. It's not in the question of where the evil came from and why it's there. The crux of the story is when the farmer says *Don't gather up the weeds now. Wait till harvest and they will be gathered up in other ways.* The ending is really the whole point of the parable.

The parable is about how we live in the face of undoubted evil, even though all our righteous instincts say we must confront evil, fight with it, root it out and burn it up. The parable says there are two things wrong with this approach.

First, it doesn't work. We aren't able to clean up the world. If we set about trying to root out evil, we risk rooting out the good too.

And second, taking it upon ourselves to rid the world of evil shows a lack of faith that that is exactly what God will do at the end of history. In this case, we're either saying to ourselves we don't trust God will do it ... or we're saying we're not prepared to wait that long.

The parable is saying that **God** will do it ... and we should wait because only God **can** do it without doing as much harm as good.

The parable is calling Christians to revolutionary patience. The world is full of people who want to take justice into their own hands and see a field with evil in it and are happy just to slash and burn the whole lot. What the world needs is *patient* people who believe God's judgement will finally do all the sifting that's necessary ... and in the meantime, are faithfully content to tend the farm knowing that that not everything in the field is wheat.

Jesus told many parables but the real parable is Jesus himself. In Jesus we see God's patience.

Jesus named and encountered the reality of evil from the beginning of his ministry. But he didn't attempt to destroy the tyranny of the Roman occupation and for that reason he was despised and rejected by many of his own people. Neither did he hide himself away. What he did was to maintain a faithful presence in the **face** of evil ... speaking the truth ... empowering a community ... modelling the fruits of the Spirit ... bringing about reconciliation ... and, ultimately, in his crucifixion ... bearing the cost of his witness. He himself demonstrated ultimate patience, trusting in God's perfect purposes.

Jesus was the 'wheat' who took the 'weeds' of the world upon himself ... and suffered in his own body the judgement of those 'weeds' ... so that the world might ultimately be free of 'weeds.'

And so we must show **our** patience in the face of evil by using only those methods that God sanctified in Jesus ... That's revolutionary ... and our revolutionary patience shows the world not only what we believe **really** works ... but that we believe **the judgement of evil is finally a matter for God, not for us.**

Paul reminded me of a poem written by Mother Teresa which fits perfectly into the message of the parable we have heard this morning. In a world where good and evil are bound fast together, it asks us to have patience, trusting that God has all in hand ... and that it is our job to meet evil ... with love ... and not allow '*the enemy*' to deflect us ...

People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centred. **Forgive them anyway.**
If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. **Be kind anyway.**

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies. **Succeed anyway.**

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you. **Be honest and frank anyway.**
What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight. **Build anyway.**

If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous. **Be happy anyway.**
The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow. **Do good anyway.**
Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough. **Give the best you've got anyway.**

You see, **in the final analysis it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.**

Amen.