

Readings: Genesis 28:10-19a; Matthew 13:24-30.

Text: Matthew 13:30a – ‘Let both of them grow together until the harvest’.

The theme that will guide our reflection is: *We are all different, but we were all created in the holy image of God. So be accepting of each and recognise the Christ that is in all of us.*

The impulse to control others is, perhaps, the most dominant instinct in the human being.

I'm sure you can all recall one of your drives to Sydney for the school holiday. You are driving. Your spouse is the passenger seat, and your 8 and 5-year olds are at the back seat. You thought you were the only driver, but you soon found out that, no, there are other drivers. You start to pull out of the garage when your 8 year old shouted: ‘Top, top. There's a blue tongue lizard on the drive way. You removed the lizard and zoomed off when the road was cleared and your spouse said, “You didn't indicate my dear.” Then you reached the Federal Highway. You drove past a car that is changing a tyre and your 5-year old, quietly said, ‘Daddy is driving too fast...’ then went back to sucking her thumb. You feel your blood near boiling point, but it's a school holiday. So you decided to smile and drove on.

The impulse to control others is a trait that we can trace through the evolutionary process. We are witnessing at the moment the power of a virus, something that is mostly dead, to control the entire world.

I was very guilty of the same before. As the eldest in a family of eight, I took it upon myself to be the shining light to my 4 brothers and 3 sisters. I told myself that I would set an example that they would follow. And when I gained entrance to university in NZ and won a government scholarship to pay for my studies, I quietly said to myself: ‘there; that is the path that you all have to follow’.

But only 2 brothers would follow my lead; the other 5 did their own thing. Was I disappointed? No. I was furious!

I felt I had the right to be angry, because I paid for their education since my parents, like most Samoans, after 50 years of NZ occupation, were poor.

In today's gospel reading the issues of accepting those that are different and disciplining our impulse to control are being explored. Like last week's gospel reading, it is a parable about farming.

A farmer had sown his field with wheat, but an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. When the plants came up, the weeds also appeared. So the slaves asked the farmer where the weeds had come from. And he said, an enemy had done it. So the slaves said to him, whether he wanted them to pull up the weeds. And the farmer replied, 'No. Let both of them grow together until the harvest.'

Clarity on a few issues will help us better understand the parable. First, the kind of mischief done by the enemy was probably common in ancient times; and it is still common today in business and in many other areas, because the impulse to control means we do not want others to be better than us.

Interestingly, despite the prevalence of the control impulse in us, I think only French writer, Alexandre Dumas, has explored the phenomenon in his book, *The Black Tulip*. The book is based on a true event, but it is fiction. It tells the story of a tulip growing completion in the Netherland, where a large sum of money would go to the person who could grow a black tulip. Young Cornelius van Baerle was very close to producing a black tulip, when he was suddenly thrown into prison. Someone did not want young Cornelius to win the big money.

Second, we also need to understand the weed. By definition, a weed is a plant that is growing in the wrong place; it is a plant that is not a member of the crop that a field has been planted to. So, a corn plant that is growing in a wheat field is a weed; it does not belong to there. This was also the meaning of the word, enemy, in ancient Near East. A stranger was a person who did not belong to a community, and was usually considered an enemy. Communities in ancient Near East, including religious communities, were usually made up of people that were related to each other.

Third, the master's decision not to pull out the weeds shows local knowledge and sound farming practice. Matthew uses the Greek word zizania, which is wild rice to describe the weed. But botanists have suggested that he is probably talking about the noxious grass called, darnel, which closely resembles wheat and is plentiful in Israel. You cannot tell the difference between the two, until the plants mature and the ears appear. The ears of the real wheat are heavy and will droop, while the ears of the darnel stand up straight. Hence, why the farmer told the slaves to leave the weeds till harvest.

Also, leaving the darnels to grow with the wheat can help in pest management. If only wheat is growing in the field, then the pests will attack the wheat. Since the darnel closely resembles wheat, the pest can end up attacking the darnel and not the wheat crop, or at least share the damage.

So what can we make of this parable?

Well, there are interpretations of the parable in verse 36 to verse 40. But as I said last week, scholars believe they were the early church's attempt to control the meanings of Jesus' parables. This parable caused a lot of headaches for the early church; they did not like it.

You see, the message of today's parable is very simple: leave the sorting out of people to God. Let them live their lives according to God's design and God's will for them. We are all different, but it is the same image of God in which we were all made. Also, God did not choose us to be his moral police, because God is love and not about morals.

The early church had great difficulty with this teaching. The important thing for them was unity and truth, where truth was defined by those in power. So the idea of allowing differing voices within the church went against the desire for unity. There was no way they would have allowed a character like Jacob, from our Old Testament reading, to be the bearer of God's salvation story.

In the end, the early church controlled the fallout of Jesus' teaching in the parable of the wheat and weed, by adding interpretations and by editing some of his sayings.

In verse 30, Jesus is purported to have said that, 'at harvest the reapers will collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned'. Scholars do not believe that Jesus would have

said such a thing; and I agree. Burning the enemy is not consistent with Jesus' sermon on the mount where he admonished people to 'love your enemies' (Mtt. 5:44). Moreover, the enemy was the stranger, and Jews were obligated to look after him. Unity without love and compassion will never work. Someone will win, and someone will suffer.

Sadly, history bears out the un-Christ like effect of the redaction in verse 30. The early church cast out people who disagreed with the official view or interpretation. And when the church became the religion of the Roman Empire, it literally bundled up and burnt people that they considered weeds in the church.

The effects of this teaching of the church is still evident in the ethnic cleansing campaigns that some had waged against people they considered different.

The situation created by the current pandemic provides for a perfect opportunity for the control freaks to gain control of things and lives; and we are seeing this with our own eyes. Here, knowledge will be important so we can counter the abuse of the situation.

The church had so many disputes throughout its history. One of the most debated issues was baptism, which caused major divisions in the church; and it is still going. Thankfully, we now have a better understanding of God and Christ, which has allowed us to baptise baby Mackenzie this morning.

But I think many of us still want to believe that everything that Jesus is purported to have said was actually said by Jesus. We like it because it justifies the nasty things that we say and do to others. I know the Uniting Church has some very progressive policies, but my experience with policies is that, they tend to hide what is actually going on.

Our church, with its two worship services, that use different styles, is vulnerable to the pitfalls of the weed growing with the wheat. The pandemic has forced us to start again with just one service. It is the hope of the ministry team that this will provide the opportunity for us to show Christ-like love to one another and to grow closer to each other. Recognise that we are all different, but that we are all children of God. Yes, the weed is also part of God's creation. Make good use of the diversity of talents, in music, in personality, in theology, and in cultures and more that are on offer in our church community.

I stopped being angry at my siblings who rebelled against me when I 'grew up' and realised that they had their own lives to live and I did not have a monopoly on good ideas about living successful lives.

Today, we hear Jesus' true voice: 'Let [the wheat] and [the weed] grow together until the harvest'.

Friends, we are all different, but we are all created in the holy image of God. So be accepting of each other and recognise the Christ that is in all of us. Come as you are; that is how God has made you, and that is how God would like us to live out our faith.

Love one another, as Christ has loved you.

For the glory of God. Amen.