

Pentecost 6 – 9 & 10.30am Wesley Services – 20th July 2014

Theme: “Allow for differences and allow God to sort things out!”

Reading: Matthew 13:24-30 & 36-43 ‘The Parable of the Weeds and the parable explained’

Introduction

One of the joys and one of the challenges of our Christian faith is the variety of people and views that we have in our congregations.

It would be much simpler if we all believed the same, all read Scripture with the same understanding, all liked the same music, were all totally faithful to Jesus as our Lord and Saviour in the same way, all had the same social justice conscience and all lived an ethical and upright life. However we do NOT live in that type of ‘utopia’ and frankly I think it would be rather boring! One of the amazing things is the diversity we have. Simply look around at one another – what a differing bunch of people we are!! All unique, all different, all with our own quirks both physically, spiritually, socially and as a worshipping community. It is into this that we have the Gospel for today and it is not an easy or straightforward piece of teaching.

Here in Matthew 13 there are seven parables about “the kingdom of heaven” and what it is like. The parables all point to the kingdom, that is, God’s rule in Israel and the world, a symbol that appears thirteen times in this chapter. There are also three interpretations of three of those parables. Last Sunday we had the Parable of the Sower with the interpretation and today we have the Parable of the Weeds with the interpretation given specifically at the request of the disciples. Let us look initially at the parable and then the interpretation before a short reflection about the impact for us today.

Matthew 13: 24-30 “The Parable of the Weeds”

Most of us accept the inevitability of having weeds in our gardens. It is a fact of life that we live with. For the avid gardener, weeds can be a huge frustration amongst the ‘vegies’ and flowers and in frustration they may be tempted to invoke a line from this parable: “An enemy has infiltrated my patch and planted this rotten, darn weed amongst my beautiful plants!” It is almost humorous as we tend to blame others for some of the things that happen to ourselves. However, in the parable, the farmer is not being funny. He is serious and blames an enemy who has come and planted the weeds amongst his good crop of wheat. It is probably not just any old weed but rather dandelion or rye grass that looks very similar to wheat until it goes to seed. Only then can you tell the difference. Hence trying to pull it out is almost pointless as much good wheat could also be mistaken for the weeds. Only at the end of the growing season, at the harvest can it be more easily sorted and then the weeds can be gathered and burnt while the wheat is taken to be stored in the farmer’s barn. Again, the imagery is for a rural farming community, similar to the setting of the sower parable of last Sunday.

Let us move to the interpretation of the parable in Matthew 13:36-43

This segment begins with the notation that Jesus ‘left the crowds and went into the house’ where his disciples approach him to ask about the meaning of the parable. Some commentators see this move from the crowds to a focus on the disciples signalling a significant turning point in the Gospel as a whole. Following on from the conflicts and rejection by his opponents in chapters 11 & 12, Jesus now concentrates on instructing his disciples.

This passage has two interlocking parts to it.

The first is the allegorical explanation of each detail of the parable in vs 37-40. The sower of the good seed is the ‘Son of Man’, a term Jesus uses of himself 81 times in the Gospels. This enigmatic title, is drawn from the book of Daniel, and refers both to the suffering and humiliation of Jesus as well as to his triumphant return at the Parousia, the

end of time as we know it. The field is the world and the good seed is the children of the kingdom, no doubt those who have faith in Jesus and follow through with righteous deeds. The weeds are the children of the evil one. The harvest is the judgement at the end of the age and the workers are the angels.

Certainly there is this battle between good and evil and it is obvious that the two can be very close together and at times indistinguishable until their actions are fully seen.

The second section of the explanation is a brief but vivid judgement scene in verses 41-43.

The triumphant Son of Man sends his angels to collect the evildoers for their punishment, and throws them into the 'furnace of fire' – a dire image perhaps drawn again from the Book of Daniel, chapter 3. The desolate image of 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' is found elsewhere in Matthew as an expression of torment and ultimate rejection.

Conversely, the righteous will 'shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father' which also comes from Daniel 12:3. It is a battle between good and evil and good ultimately prevails. However that is not always evident along the way, only at the end. Hence for the disciples the parable of the Weeds and the Wheat and its explanation counsel patience and tolerance in the face of a mixed world of good and evil. God will provide a final reckoning of justice at the end of the world. Also Matthew's Gospel displays a realistic view of the human condition. The disciples are to trust God's providence and in the meantime, be faithful to Jesus' teaching.

Now to the really hard part – what do we take from this passage for ourselves today?

One of the writers on this passage had some interesting insights which I'm paraphrasing a little. Her name is Nancy Hastings Sehested. She said it was as if the disciples wanted to know about the weeds, to get rid of them all immediately so as not to have problems in the church that was to come.

Jesus in a sense says, 'Hey it doesn't work like that. You will always have issues with people, some with whom you didn't even know you had a problem with.' How true!!

Jesus knew weeds. He was a poor Jew who grew up among a powerless minority group. He saw life from the vulnerable perspective of injustice and suffering, not from a manicured garden of privilege and power. The Jewish people were living in occupied territory. Their lives were being choked by the 'weeds of the day', the Romans (from their perspective!). Many were losing land that had been in their families for generations. Some were losing their means to work. It was a time of economic upheaval. People were hurting, and were afraid. How would they survive?

Sound familiar, but reversed when it comes to Palestine and Israel today! Where is the justice? A difficult question and it depends on your perspective. No simple answer.

Even the church has had a long and tragic history of camouflaging evil with religious justifications. The church has been known to bless war as holy, bless violence as redemptive, hide sexual abuse to protect the institution and sanction certain hatreds as ordained by God. In a sense 'the devil' has taken up residence as a weed in God's garden and is initially undetected.

This parable confronts us with the uncomfortable, suggesting even today, that there is evil close at hand. Sometimes we struggle with moral discernment in the context of a complex world trying to fathom where God is and what stance we should take on a variety of issues. No easy, straightforward answers to complex issues.

But we are called to listen afresh to God's word, not to judge and get on with following Jesus faithfully. Simple, straightforward, but not always easy!! "He or she who has ears, let them hear." Amen.