Wheat or Weed?

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
(17.7.2011)

A middle-aged woman had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital. She has a near death experience and asks God if this is it. ‘No’ He says - she has another 30 years to live. Upon recovery she decides to just stay in the hospital and have a face lift, tummy tuck, changes her hair colour, the works. She reckons if she’s got another 30 years she might as well make the most of it. Walking out of the hospital after the last operation she’s killed by a speeding ambulance. Arriving in front of God she complains, “I thought you said I had another 30 years?” God replies, “I didn’t recognize you.” The joke is of course that God DOES recognise us!

Out of the blue once I had an apologetic letter from and uncle. Sifting through sacks of recycling he’d discovered an unopened letter from me containing a photo of my ordination 18 months previous. Because I’d put a printed address label on it he’d mistaken it for junk mail! An easy mistake to make – it often does all look the same – sometimes the other way round. What looks like a nice handwritten letter turns out to be an advert. Even recycling it isn’t simple either – some in plastic – it all has to be disentangled.

And that’s a bit like this parable that Jesus tells – the good and the bad entangled together and not easily recognizable until someone sits down and painstakingly sifts through it all by hand.

But, in more ways than one, His story is far more serious. In Jesus’ time, and still today it is a criminal offence in Israel to plant this weed, Darnel, amongst someone’s wheat crop. It closely resembles wheat and the difference is only apparent when the plants mature and produce the seeds, which are poisonous. Sadly whilst it is growing it isn’t just impossible to tell it also entwines its roots amongst good crops.

The disciples ask Jesus to make this parable clear to them. He explains that the one sowing the good seed is the Son of Man and the field is the world and the good seed are the sons of the Kingdom but the weeds are the sons of the evil one. The enemy who sows them is the devil and the harvest is the end of the age. The harvesters are angels. The slaves? He doesn’t say – but seems most likely to be His hearers/disciples us! We are in this story!
Jesus says that the slaves want to dive in and uproot the evil but the Master says to let both grow together until harvest time. At the right time, the end of the age, the master, the Son of Man will tell the harvesters, His angels, to gather up the weeds, the evil doers and bind them in bundles to burn them (completely consume). The good seed, the sons of the Kingdom will go into His barn.

The way the story is written (Greek grammar) tell us that Jesus is telling a story about something that is happening in the present. It is important because it is about our present lives, how our world is at this present time. i.e. this is important to us here and now! What can we learn from it then?

A sower sows good seed but whilst his household are sleeping an enemy plants some poisonous weed seeds amongst the crop. While they are sleeping – whilst their eyes are taken off the ball? There is a devil! I never cease to be amazed at how many people don’t believe in the devil. Never allow yourself to fall into that trap! I can assure you that not only is he alive and well he is VERY active amongst us. Further, the devil masquerades as an angel of light. We cannot always distinguish between good and bad – like wheat and darnel.

This can apply to both things in our life and to people. I can think of things in my life that have seemed so bad that I have wanted to rid myself of them but in fact that God has turned around and used within me for good. Similarly the other way round too, what often seems very good, New Age, alternative healing therapies are actually the work of the devil.

Think of people, St Paul – a persecutor of Christians. Think of Matthew the tax collector. Both became key players in the growth and spread of the Christian faith – what looked bad to begin with was in fact good. Sadly it works the other way round too. I suppose a good example of this might be priests who have abused children? Saline – nurse?

This leads to the hardest thing we must learn from this passage. There’s a saying – ‘don’t just stand there do something’. This parable teaches us the opposite. Don’t rush off and weed or kill the bad stuff. Wait and see. Let God do it when He is ready.

But what farmer wouldn’t want to kill weeds that strangling and sucking the life out of the crops he has carefully planted? Isn’t that our first reaction to the evil we often encounter in the world –
we must do away with it immediately. Time often shows us to be wrong though and many “witch hunts” show that they were more about making the hunters feel secure than actually doing something about the evil. Example of the murder at Clay Cross of someone accused of abusing his children – only to discover his wife had made the story up.

Weeding out the bad often makes us feel good but Jesus says and shows us that this is not the right way. He says, wait. Wait until harvest-time because the process of pulling out the evil will also pull out some of the good too.

Throwing the weeds into the fire is God’s job, not ours. When we encounter what we see as evil, we want to root it out and destroy it. We often rush onward, “Don’t just stand there, do something!” But Jesus is encouraging us to do the opposite “Don’t just do something, stand there!” Rooting out the bad may damage the good – killing burglar bill would leave a widow and orphans! Wait to let the nature of the godly prosper and prevail in due course. Profoundly, Jesus is leading us to cease chasing after the bad, and rather concentrate on the good.

Jesus is saying to us that we can relax because the owner of the farm, God himself, will make it all come out right in the end. We would do better by paying less attention to the weeds and spend more time tending the wheat – the good in life – encouraging its growth and putting it to use according to the values of God’s Kingdom. In the conventional wisdom of the world, the teaching of this parable seems crazy and impossible.

Yet we know that it is possible - leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King chose not to tear at the weeds, but to nurture the wheat. They knew that those who live by the sword ultimately die by the sword.

Tough teaching - but Jesus, in dying on the cross, did not seek to destroy his enemies, rather he forgave them. He looked to God to sort it out in the end. A picture of angels sorting out the seeds of the two plants. It will be done at the proper time: correctly, no risk involved in not recognizing wheat from weed - a painstaking task. In leaving the weeds to God we will, in ourselves and in the world around us, turn all our hearts and souls to nurturing the wheat that God has given us.

We may think that we are growing next to a weed, but they still have time to turn out as wheat!
God is patient and merciful and knows that pulling up weeds would damage the remaining plants. If that weed-look-a-like St Paul had been killed before his conversion thousands upon thousands wouldn’t have come to know Christ would they?

So we shouldn’t be discouraged when we see others who’ve not become Christians yet. There’s still time for them, we’re called to keep praying for them, living the Christian life alongside them, and sharing our faith let God do the judging!

We can’t tell! “In one of the first crusades, knights from western Europe rampaged through an Arab town on their way to the Holy Land killing everyone in sight. It was not until later, when they turned the bodies over, that they found crosses around most of their victims’ necks. It never occurred to them that Christians came in brown as well as white.” So because of the fact that we often can’t tell the wheat from the weeds, and that they are so often intertwined, we see that the landowner seems more interested that things grow than he is in a pure, clean and tidy field.

Similarly we sometimes we see someone profess a faith in Jesus. We shouldn't be fooled into thinking that a quick commitment and a short flurry of activity is, necessarily, the mark of a true Christian. The true Christian continues to grow. Persevering through the difficult times of being strangled by the weeds of life. Being rooted in Jesus. Continuing to worship him, pray to him, study his word, serve him.

This parable is about the weeds and the wheat growing up side by side. The wheat continues to grow despite the weeds competing for water, nutrients and sunlight. Christians are not called to be separated from the difficulties and the pressures of the world. We are not called to become hermits but to grow amongst hard hearts, competing pressures, apparent failures, physical, emotional and spiritual difficulties. We are a mixture of saints and sinners. Patience and tolerance is needed. None of that ‘what do we want, when do we want it – now-now-now’ stuff for us. Sound-bite snap decision judgement may make good newspaper copy but it is invariably inline with God’s thinking. Plants might be either wheat or weeds but people are a mix of both and thankfully God does not lose hope that WE might reform. For if we think that we are without sin we deceive ourselves.

We shouldn't be discouraged or impatient. What we see as a weed may be budding wheat! Let’s concentrate on growing, rooted in Jesus, despite the difficulties around us. You never know – others seeing our forbearance and forgiveness of others may be the very thing that
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makes them change from weed to wheat!