

Pentecost 7 19th July 2020

Matthew 13:24-43

The character of parables is to provoke questions and reflections. Tonight I want to share five questions which emerged for me as I read this gospel and offer a few thoughts as tentative responses to my own questions.

First question: What is this parable saying about the way human beings deal with the weeds in our lives in comparison to the way God might deal with them? Think of the problem people in our lives (assuming we have one or two). At best we generally want them to go away and stop irritating us. At worst we would want to destroy them – which is basically what is going on with both terrorist and state sanctioned wars. We would like to get to work right away and root out the ‘problem people’. That’s not the way children of the kingdom are to operate because it’s not the way the ‘owner’ (God) operates. The owner points out that it’s not just the ‘weed’ who will be hurt when the weed is ripped out but also the fragile wheat plant – so much so, that it won’t grow to maturity in order to bear full fruit. By being violent to our neighbour we do damage to ourselves.

Second – a problem: if we pull the weeds out then it assumes we are discerning enough to distinguish good wheat from bad weeds. In actual fact, young wheat plants and weeds grow very closely together in the field and are quite hard to distinguish to the untrained eye. We certainly don’t have the discernment of God in this regard. Jesus himself becomes the victim of mistaken identity. He was completely mistaken for being a ‘weed’ and crucified accordingly.

Third - a paradox: if we ‘accuse’ the other as being a ‘weed’ then we are already part of the problem - we have turned ourselves into the voice of the ‘Satan’ and hence become a weed ourselves! This is precisely the hidden problem of scapegoating – it’s very possible that the person or persons we would most like to rip out as being the problem in our lives are, in fact, instruments of God. The very fact that the Son of God could be crucified by religion and state, with 100% moral self justification, ought to challenge us whenever we want to jump too quickly to judgement....whenever we are sure that WE are the wheat and someone else is the evil weed

Fourth – another question: What is the significance of the Mustard Seed? The mustard seed metaphor is stuck right here in the middle of a reference to the Kingdom of God being like a mustard seed. A colleague of mine who was a wheat farmer for many years told me that a mustard plant is the kind of plant you definitely don’t want mixed up in your wheat. Is there an ironic point here that Jesus and his kingdom can easily be mistaken as an annoying and virulent weed, sown in the calm security of the fields of our every day lives.

Fifth: What are we to do about the fire of judgement in this parable? On one hand God is patient, but on the other hand God, in the end, seems to be incredibly punitive? Should we worry about this? Are we left with a violent God? Or can we separate judgement from punishment?

We so much want there to be fairness in the form of payback. It just seems ‘right’. If not in our own lifetime then in the ultimate balancing of things. But the text doesn’t say that anyone will be burned only that it is a conceptual possibility in order to highlight that life

must ultimately triumph over death. That in the end evil must be burned away. That Sin must be extinguished. That a light switch being turned on must extinguish darkness. But what if there are no clearly evil people (weeds) or clearly good people (wheat)? What if most people are a mixture, like wheat and weeds in a field - that the line dividing good and evil runs not between people but right through the middle of every human heart(Solzhenitsyn). A mixture of faithfulness and unfaithfulness. A mixture of trust and fear.

That this is in fact the case is revealed in how a good God resolves these paradoxes in God's own body - even on a cross and in doing so reconciles ALL things to God's self so that ALL God's children would ultimately be led home. This may seem grossly unjust - a violation of natural law. But for a loving parent it would be our deepest desire, that not a single child of ours would be lost, not a single lost sheep (1/99). That all would be restored - a different kind of justice entirely. Preserve us from the liberal and conservative mindsets of justice, both equally agreeing that 'someone's gotta pay' (but different victims in each case). Thank God we are saved by the faithfulness of another and not our own.

'All God can do is to give his love' – both to wheat and to weeds, and apparently our response is to do the same.