

Sermon for 19th July 2026, Year A, Pentecost 8, Proper 11

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

Sermon

If you recall last week's gospel reading, Jesus was offering his disciples a parable about good seed being scattered by a good Sower onto various types of surfaces – hard paths, rocky ground, thorns and weeds, and of course the good soil. His interpretation was that this is a metaphor for how our different circumstances in life might cause us to hear and understand – or not hear or understand – the message that Jesus is preaching.

This week, Jesus takes his metaphor further in this second parable about a Sower sowing good seed in a field. Except this time, there is also an enemy, a wicked Sower, who sows bad seed in the same field. The good and bad thus grow up together, and it proves impossible to remove the bad without also uprooting the good. His solution is to wait until the plants are ripe before then harvesting and sifting them into separate bundles for judgement and reward.

As is usual with Jesus, his parables and metaphors refer to everyday circumstances that his listeners would understand only too well. They would have easily recognised that Jesus was referring to a weed called darnel, also known in biblical terms as 'tares.' Its roots surround the roots of the wheat, sucking up nutrients and spare water, making it impossible to remove without damaging the good crop. Even worse, above the ground, the darnel looks identical to wheat, until it bears seed, and those seeds are poisonous and could cause everything from hallucination to death. For this reason, darnel is also known as 'drunken cheat-grass.'

Unlike the previous parable in which the different outcomes were purely due to circumstance, Jesus says the sowing of these evil weeds is deliberate and malicious. There are few places where Jesus is clearer about the reality of deliberate evil in the world. In his explanation, Jesus divides the world into children of the Kingdom of heaven, and the children of the Devil, as if some people are entirely good and others are entirely evil, albeit so intertwined in each other's lives that they cannot be separated during their lifetimes.

While this may make some sense of why God doesn't just annihilate all evil in the world, and was no doubt a comfort to the disciples seeking an understanding of why their message wasn't universally praised and accepted, I think a more modern hearer of this reading might recognise that good and evil are not just mixed up in our communities and in society, but actually entwined within our own hearts and minds.

Don't our own lives often resemble the farmer's infested field with wheat and weeds entangled and inseparable? Who among us always says and does exactly the right, good and holy thing? Even St Paul says in his letter to the Romans, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." And the first step of the AA twelve-step programme confesses, "We are powerless over alcohol, and our lives have become unmanageable." We do our best in life to untangle the goodness and selfishness within us, through prayer and acts of compassion, but there are some things that only God can heal, and sometimes I think that may not be in this life, but the next.

One way or another, Jesus' parable makes it clear that the Church is always full of both wheat and weeds, but nevertheless we mustn't make any rush to judgement. We can't always tell initially what is good and what is bad. Many evil things there are that may look good at first, until it is too late to do anything about them. And many good things there are that get ripped from the soil in horror, before they have time to prove themselves with their fruit.

In the Church today, we're still confronted by many such dilemmas. I've been part of churches where someone with visible tattoos or even just wearing casual clothes on Sunday was seen as a dangerous influence, and some where women were not allowed to speak from the front, or even pray aloud without covering their heads. Are rough sleepers or asylum seekers in a congregation seen as sources of suspicion or blessing? Are gay people basically weeds that will poison everything if allowed to flourish? Are trans people, who change their names and pronouns, deceivers, groomers of children, and perverts? I have heard all these things from various church leaders over the years. There are so many churches, not in the Scottish Episcopal Church thankfully, but certainly in the Church of England, where I would be seen very much as the worst possible kind of weed, one that looks like wheat, but whose fruit is poisonous and deadly – a wolf in sheep's clothing.

The instinct of most churches, like the slaves in the parable, is to set the boundaries as narrowly as possible. They'd rather rip out some of the good wheat – perhaps a lot of the good wheat – rather than let any bad tares get through. But the parable advises us, when in doubt, to wait until the harvest, when the plants can be judged by the difference in the fruit they produce. “By their fruit you shall know them,” said Jesus, earlier in this same gospel.

This isn't an excuse for inaction, or avoiding conflict, or allowing blatant evil and abuse to persist. It isn't a cry for tolerance of wicked behaviour or enforced forgiveness of abuse. Later in Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells us how to deal with unrepentant conflict in a church, for example, with the ultimate sanction being exclusion from the community. We don't wait until the end of the age to protect victims from abusers. Where it's clearly obvious that fruit is bad, Jesus calls on us to take action with a call to repentance, justice, and prevention of further harm. But wherever we are unable in all wisdom to sort out what is good from what is bad, where perhaps the fruits have not yet emerged, or where prejudice

is mistaking good for bad or vice versa, Jesus says this will be resolved by the angels in their wisdom at the appropriate time and not by us. Our role in the meantime is to carry on doing our best to be wheat, continuing to grow in faith, and producing good fruit.

The ending of the parable reassures us that ultimately it is God, the God who is Love, who is in control. It is not Evil that makes the final decision who is to be saved, but Love. Thank God it is Love that does the sifting of good from evil, because only Love has the patience to wait, to ensure that nothing good is ever lost.