

## **Sermon for Sunday 23 July 2023 – The Seventh Sunday after Trinity**

**Revd Canon Simon Pitcher, Rector**

***Isaiah 44.6-8; Psalm 86.11-17; Romans 8.12-25; Matthew 13.24-30,36-43***

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

Many of us enjoyed, a few weeks ago, the Open Gardens. There were beautiful sights to behold around every corner. And those wonderful gardens weren't the result of a couple of days work. They were the fruitful results of years of effort - one couple told me that they'd been working on their garden for 27 years to transform it into the beautiful garden that we saw a few weeks ago.

So it requires patience and vision and a degree of hard work to transform a weed-strewn field into a beautiful garden. So Jesus told the crowd a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven. He tells us that a farmer sowed good seed in his field, but in the night, an enemy comes and sows weeds among the wheat in an attempt to spoil the crop. Now, we've heard in our hymns this morning the weeds being called 'tares'. Some translators describe the tares as a plant called darnel.

And the Internet says that the darnel is the evil twin of wheat, that it looks the same while it's growing, but that if you eat the seeds of darnel, it's a bit like smoking cannabis, apparently. And if you eat too much of it, it causes dizziness and nausea, and in extreme cases, it can kill you. Darnel is referred to in Shakespeare, I think it appears in King Lear. And it said on the Internet that wherever darnel is written about in literature, it's in the context of treachery and evil. So we can understand these weeds, this darnel, as the pantomime villain of the grass world.

But when wheat and darnel grow together in the same field, the roots become entangled together. So you can't pull out the weed without destroying the wheat. You have to let them both grow together and at harvest time, make a real effort to determine which are the good seeds and which are the bad seeds. And there was a Roman law that said, if anybody sows darnel in a field of wheat, they should be put to death. So it seems that Jesus really was telling a parable about something that actually did happen.

So I wondered who this parable is about. The good seed, as we heard last week, is the word of God, the ministry of Jesus, and the good seed can be harvested and turned into wholesome bread. So the healthy bread, the wholesome bread that Jesus offers is Himself. And the result of eating that bread is to abide in Christ, to receive His Holy Spirit, to see the Kingdom of God grow among us. So the darnel, the weeds are that which looks like it might be the word of God, but it's not.

So I wonder who that might be directed at. And I wondered who was in the crowd that Jesus was talking to. He's addressing a large crowd. Well, firstly, we remember the disciples were in the crowd. So is this parable directed at the disciples? At this stage, all of the twelve disciples are eager and enthusiastic, sitting at the feet of their master, learning from him, anxious about what the future will hold, but

committing themselves to the cause. At this stage, as Jesus looks upon his disciples, there's no obvious evidence of a betrayer. Only later will Judas show his true colours. But in the meantime the disciples will all be allowed to grow and to follow and to work out their faith for themselves. So is the parable directed at the disciples?

Secondly, I wondered if the parable is actually directed at the whole crowd, because within the crowd there would be a right cosmopolitan mix of people. They're in Galilee, and Galilee was a mixed-up place. There were Jewish neighbourhoods and there were Roman neighbourhoods and it was a trading route from all parts of the Mediterranean world. So this was a mixed up crowd and the Jewish communities were not pleased that the Roman communities were there. From a Jewish perspective, the Romans are the weeds and they are the wheat because this is our promised land that God has given to us.

From a Roman perspective it's the other way around. So in the crowd, therefore, Jesus looks upon different groups of people. And I guess he wondered will God's people, the Jewish people, fulfil their calling to be a light, to lighten the nations? Will they turn their hearts to the message that he is preaching from Israel's God? Will they break down those barriers and embrace their neighbours as brothers and sisters, all children of one God?

Or will those barriers be built higher? And what about the Romans? Will they be merciful in their rule or will they continue to be brutal? Will the things that divide people continue to be things that people focus on? Or will people hear the word that Jesus speaks, break down those barriers and see one another as children of God? How will his words be received? Who will embrace the gospel and who will not? And at this stage, as Jesus preaches, at this point in his ministry, it's too early to say. All will have to be allowed to grow and to dwell on his word and to respond. So was this parable directed at the crowd in different groups?

Or maybe the parable was directed at religious leaders because there would have been religious figures in the crowd, there would have been the synagogue leaders from the different communities in Galilee and quite possibly there would be some Pharisees there sent by the authorities in Jerusalem to work out what this difficult guy Jesus is talking about. So religious leaders; well, the religious leaders were meant to be sowers of good seed, weren't they? The ones who spoke about Israel's God. They're the ones who, above all else people, should have been able to look to and see evidence of the good seed. The evidence of God's harvest should shine out of their lives. Their ministry should be drawing people to the one true God. So these are people who should look like wheat, but what will they say about Jesus as his ministry unfolds? Will they be producers of good wholesome wheat in the name of Israel's God? Or will what they say and do make you sick?

So is this a parable about the religious leaders? Well, in all of those different groups and people in the crowd, I guess it's directed at all of them. But what Jesus saw is a great many individuals, people like you and me. And maybe it is that Jesus isn't speaking to a particular group, but to each individual that each person would hear with their ears and understand. So there was a great mix of people just like us. And what impact do his words make? Perhaps in truth, each one of us is a mixture of good seed and dandelion.

There are certainly areas in my life that I'm very happy for Christ to come into, that I would surrender to Christ. There are other areas of my life I think I prefer to keep to myself. Being a disciple of Christ is a lifetime pilgrimage of prayer and of Bible reading and of repentance and renewal.

And God in his good grace, doesn't rush into making judgments prematurely, but rather he allows us a lifetime to grow, a lifetime to wrestle with our faith, a lifetime to wrestle with who it is that God is calling each one of us to be. So discipleship and fruitful discipleship can be compared to growing a beautiful garden, because it's not something that happens overnight, not something that can be rushed, but something that requires patience and care.

We heard a reading from St. Paul's letter to the Romans just now and elsewhere, to the Romans, St. Paul writes these words: 'I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate, for I know that nothing good dwells within me that is in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I can't do it, for I do not do the good I want, but the evil that I do not want to do. Now, if I do what I do not want, it's no longer that I do do it, but sin that dwells within me.' So St. Paul, as he writes to the Romans, is painfully aware of the weeds in his own life and the wrestle that he has between wanting to do what's right, but being always drawn into doing what he wishes he didn't do. In today's reading, he describes that as groaning, spiritually groaning. And he goes on with these words: 'I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind making me captive, the law of sin that dwells in my members, wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death.' Paul understands that he cannot transform himself by his own efforts alone, but only by the work of the Holy Spirit within him. And so he says, thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord, because the Holy Spirit will work within his life to draw out all that is good and wholesome. The best quality wheat.

So maybe we can identify with that wrestling and that groaning that St. Paul describes. And one of the absolution prayers that we sometimes use in our liturgy is this: 'the Almighty and merciful Lord grant pardon and forgiveness of sins, time for amendment of life and the grace and the strength of the Holy Spirit.' There's a prayer for time; we're granted time; we're granted a lifetime to transform through the work of the Holy Spirit into a beautiful garden. The harvest doesn't have to be rushed. It might take 27 years or longer before a wasteland becomes a beautiful garden. And we have a merciful gardener at work within us. To paraphrase another passage from St. Paul no weed, no darnel is too strong, and it can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

And then one final thought. As I was studying darnel on the Internet, the thought struck me that even the most worst aspects that we think we identify within ourselves can be transformed by the grace and the love of the Holy Spirit. Because what to one person might be a weed, might to another person be a beautiful wild flower. So I was interested to read that in the Isle of Man, Dharmal is openly cultivated because they use it there to create a lively and a fulsome beer. So thanks be to God. Amen.