

Parable of wheat and weeds (Matt 13:24-30; 36-43)

Sermon delivered by Revd Claire Nye Hunter, Cathedral of St Michael & St George, Grahamstown on 22 July 2013.

INTRODUCTION

In the 13th ch of Matthew, Jesus tells no less than 8 parables. These are stories that teach about spiritual truths. Most of the time, Jesus deliberately does not explain them- it is up to us to work out what they might mean for us today. There is no *one* correct way to interpret them- no clear 'right and wrong'.

It is interesting however that the disciples specifically asked him to explain *this* one- the parable of wheat and weeds(darnel)-perhaps because they didn't 'get it' or it contained truths that troubled them.

Let's recap the story, and see how we might apply it to our lives today.

THE PARABLE

We're told of a man who sows good seed in his field. He's happy with his work, and waits for the plants to sprout. But unknown to him, in the dead of night, an enemy has come along and sowed weeds among the wheat. The plants grow up, and it's not immediately obvious which is which. You see, the weeds here are probably **darnel**, a mildly poisonous weed that *looks* like wheat in the early stages. It's only when the grains/heads appear that the weeds are seen to be different. But by then they are fully grown.

The slaves of the farmer are surprised when the weeds appear: 'Master, didn't you sow *good* seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' (27) (it sounds like my garden!) If you sow good seed, you expect a good crop - not weeds. The farmer realises an enemy has done this - something which was common at that time, and devastating- hence it was considered illegal in Roman law. But rather than sending in the slaves to pick out the bad weeds, the farmer tells them to wait. The roots and shoots of the wheat and weeds are so intertwined, it would be impossible to get rid of the weeds without uprooting the wheat as well. It's only when the harvest comes and *everything* is pulled out that the weeds can be clearly identified and separated from the wheat and burnt. So best leave both of them grow together until the harvest.

JESUS' EXPLANATION (VS 36-43)

Jesus tells his disciples that He is the farmer, who sows the good seed representing the children of God, the followers of Jesus. On the other hand, the weeds are the children of the evil one, sown by the devil, in opposition to Jesus and his purposes. At the end of time, judgement will come when God will send the angels to be the harvesters to weed out everything that causes sin and all who do evil.

APPLICATION- PART 1

1. **The world.** So here we have a picture of the world we live in- a mixture of good and evil, living side by side. Jesus warns that it is not always easy to tell the difference, so we had better be careful not to judge one another in case we get it wrong- anyway, that is God's responsibility, not ours.

2. The church. It is a picture of the *world*, but in fact even the *church* reflects this mixed reality - wheat and weeds/darnel side by side, often looking fairly similar. It's sometimes very hard to tell the difference.

Wheat mistaken for weeds: I wonder if you remember the time (in the Apartheid era) when Christians including Anglicans mistook **+Desmond Tutu** for weed/darnel/poison, because they didn't agree with his outspoken prophetic witness. Many even accused him of being the devil incarnate and left the Anglican church!

And of course we know how the powers that be (both politicians and Christians) judged **Nelson Mandela**...

Mistaken identity- wheat confused with weed/poisonous darnel! (Thank God the accusers couldn't uproot the supposed 'weeds'!)

Weeds mistaken for wheat: The opposite is also true- you can have people who on the surface look like wheat/ followers of Jesus, speaking the right spiritual language; doing churchy things -but in fact they're more like weeds/darnel/poison. 'By their fruit ye shall know them'- and instead of demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control) they produce the opposite. People whose behaviour is not characterised by love etc but is counterproductive, divisive, insisting on getting its own way, pushing personal agendas, self serving, power hungry, not building up and edifying the body but breaking it down. What looks like wheat is really weed.

3. Our own lives. I wish to suggest that this parable might even be a picture of ourselves- you and me, a mixture of weeds and wheat, good and bad, trying to be Christ-like but often getting it wrong; having mixed motives; blind spots; at times being more selfish than serving, looking after our own interests rather than the interests of others; sometimes loving and humble, sometimes arrogant and stubborn... Can you recognise yourself there? I wonder if you, like me, can identify with St Paul when he acknowledged (in Rom 7:15-20) "*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want- is what I do! Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me*"? As Christians, we are still sinful people on a journey towards holiness; the Spirit helping us to become more Christ-like. But we haven't arrived yet; we're not perfect. As I once read on a car Bumper sticker: "Please be patient, God's not finished with me yet". "Christians are not made, they are in the making". If you and I take an honest look at ourselves, I suspect we might find that there is a mixture of weeds and wheat, existing side by side within.

So what are we to do about the weeds in the world, the church, our own lives?

I wonder if there were some overzealous "weeders" in Matthew's congregation who wanted to purify the community by rooting out the bad seed. This seems to be a temptation for followers of Jesus in every age. Jesus' parable makes clear that any attempt to root out the weeds will only do more damage to the crop.

In spite of Jesus' warning, we see this played out far too many times in congregations and denominations, with some determined to root out anyone who does not agree with their "right" interpretation of Scripture,

liturgical practice, or stand on a particular issue. This judgemental attitude does serious damage to our Christian witness and mission. So for example:

Who/what defines a 'true Christian'? I have come across Christians who have an idea that the Church is like a 'club' for *members only*- those who have signed up, passed the requirements, know the rules, pay their dues; conform to their particular brand of Christianity. Make the grade and you're 'in', if not- you are 'out'.

What do the scriptures say?

- You must be born again, believe and trust in Jesus_(John's gospel)
- You are saved by faith alone/ all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved (Paul)
- *not* everyone who says Lord, Lord will enter the K of God but they who DO the will of the Father (Matthew)
- sheep and goats will be separated not according to belief but acts of compassion to poor, prisoners, sick (parable of sheep and goats in Matthew)
- faith without works is dead (James)
- repent and be baptised(Acts).
- Then the issue arises as to *What* baptism is acceptable- babies, adults; sprinkling, immersion (groot doop)?

Different denominations emphasise different scriptures- so at the end of the day- who is right? wrong? Wheat? Weed?

Jesus makes clear that we simply cannot be certain who is "in" or who is "out." In fact, God's judgment about these matters will take many by surprise (*see for eg 7:21-23; 8:11-12; 21:31-32; 25:31-46*). Thank God it is not up to us! We can leave the weeding to the angels, and get on with the mission Jesus has given us -- proclaiming the *good* news of the kingdom of God; living according to the great commandment to Love God and love one another as Jesus has loved us.

APPLICATION PART 2- LIVING WITH AMBIGUITY

Parables are open to interpretation.

I would like to suggest that this parable could also be about living with **ambiguity and contradiction**. This can feel uncomfortable, as for many in the church, there is a deep need for *certainty*. We want everything to be nice and clear cut- wheat or weeds, right or wrong, black or white. 'Tell me exactly what to believe or do, and I will do it'. Yet life, and matters of faith, is not always so simple. There are many grey areas, controversial issues. Deeply committed Christians who are (as Paul says in Romans 8:14) 'led by the Spirit' may be deeply convicted about something yet reach different, even opposing conclusions! When we prayerfully seek to discern the will of God, in humility we need to recognise that we are shaped by our life experience, our social and cultural context. We read the *same scriptures* and have the *same Spirit* within, yet even so we won't necessarily agree, or see eye to eye. There is no such thing as an objective reading

of the scripture- we *interpret* it through our own lenses, our own narrow vision. (*a fellow theological student of mine loved to say: "The Bible says it, I believe it and that's all there is to it!!"). Furthermore, as Anglicans, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we look to scripture, reason and tradition to inform our decisions.* And so we must wait, living with ambiguity of both the wheat and the weeds until the day of harvest when they may be separated in due time.

So for eg, some controversial issues where Christians disagree include :

- **Gay sexuality.** This remains a very painful, complex and divisive issue even within the Anglican church. Not even all our Bishops see eye to eye on this one. (*On all sides of the debate, Christians use different scriptures to back up their arguments.*). Very recently our Synod of Bishops circulated a working document with pastoral guidelines concerning ministry to those in Civil Unions, Gay people in ministry and related matters. There is ongoing discussion around these as we are far from reaching agreement as to the way forward.

Earlier this year a group of our CSM (Cathedral Student Ministry) students were trained and equipped to exercise a particular outreach ministry to students during O week, outside Rat and Parrot and other pubs (*love in action- serving pancakes, hot drinks, escorting women students safely home etc*). Moments before starting, we received an urgent message from our 'trainers' (who had come from Anglican churches in Cape Town and Australia) that we were no longer permitted to continue because they had heard that there were two gay students in the team. They told us that their organisation was not willing to be associated with a church who allowed Gay people to be in ministry-*in their* understanding of scripture, this was clearly wrong. What were we to do? As CSM we don't agree that a person's sexual orientation should disqualify them from ministry or the opportunity to be used by God (*are we not all made in the image of God? Does not the same Spirit live in us?*) - so we opted to continue as planned, but under a *different name*.

Who was Right/ wrong? Wheat/weeds?

- **Women in ministry.** For many years, the church struggled with the idea of women being ordained, citing scriptures (out of context!) such as 'Women must be silent in churches' (1 Cor 14:34), I do not permit a woman to teach' etc.

In my early days of ministry, a certain gentleman in the congregation made a point of getting up to leave during the gradual hymn when he saw that I would be preaching, as he considered that to be 'an abomination to the Lord'! Yet elsewhere the scriptures tell us that the same Spirit is gives gifts to each one, as He chooses- irrespective of gender (1 Cor 12:4ff). In the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14ff) we- men and women- will be held responsible for how we do/don't use our God given gifts!

Only this past week the C of E finally passed a motion at synod allowing women to be elected as Bishops. As you know, the Catholic Church is still very opposed to this.

Who is right/ Wrong? Wheat/weeds?

- **The church and politics.** Even though we as Christians (hopefully) pray before we vote in an election, we do not have a united political voice. You will find Christians on all sides of the political spectrum- even in this Cathedral! Who hears God's voice correctly? Who is Right? Wrong? Wheat/weeds?
- **Situation of escalating conflict in the Gaza strip and Israel.** There are sharply different voices among Christians all claiming to be right, claiming the moral high ground. Who is Right? Wrong? Wheat/weeds?

And of course the list could go on. To mention but a fewt...

- **Abortion-** pro- choice; pro- life? Find Christians fiercely on both sides of the debate.
- **Euthanasia-** *Recently the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, as well as +Desmond Tutut have spoken in support of Lord Falconer's Assisted Dying Bill. This has been welcomed by some, and strongly criticized by others.*
- **Marriage and related issues** *Is it ever acceptable for Christians to divorce and break their marriage vow? What about remarriage after divorce? What about Christians living together before marriage?*
- **Fracking**
- **Remembrance day** – every year we remember those who died in the great Wars. Yet some would ask- *Is there such a thing as a Just War? Should Christians take up arms and fight? Serve in the military?*

In all these matters, who has the mind of Christ? Sometimes we can be quick to assess what is good/right and what is not with the effortless phrase "The Bible says" .Matthew's parable this week is in one sense a warning. Lest we think we have it all figured out how to judge evil from good, moral from immoral, right from wrong, virtuous from unvirtuous, think again. According to whom? In what contexts? By what standards? When we start going down the road of making our lot in life electing *who* and *what* is good and evil we may very well discover that others will make similar conclusions about us!

"Judge not, lest ye be judged also". We believe that we are the children of God, led by the Spirit. Perhaps today we are reminded of the need to pray for the grace and humility to acknowledge that **my/our way**, my opinion, my interpretation, my point of view, my approach is not necessarily the *only* right one. (*Dare I say I suspect that at the end of the day we will not be judged according to our correct theological opinions but our love for one another and our unity in diversity!*) Weeds and weeds are intertwined, and exist side by side.

As we wrestle with issues facing the church, and choices/decisions we need to make affecting our own lives; as we pray for the guidance of the Spirit as we discern a way forward in these 'grey areas'- let us also

acknowledge that sometimes we make good decisions/ sometimes we get it right- but other times not. When we get it wrong (maybe in hindsight) and hurt others through our choices, may we be quick to forgive ourselves and one another, even as we hope to be forgiven. May we strive to love more, and judge less.

So we must wait, living with the tension of not always knowing, yet seeking to be faithful- living with both the wheat and the weeds side by side until the day of harvest when God himself will be the judge.