

How do you deal with weeds?

The sermon given by Rev Eddie Sykes at St Anne's Dunbar
on Sunday 23 July 2023

The readings were: Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43



Do you ever wonder why on the one hand humanity can be so wonderful, and gracious; and then on the other hand why it is so brutal and chaotic.

We have scientists and engineers working to make homes, and bridges, and find cures for all kinds of life-threatening diseases and conditions – and then we have those whose energies are engaged in making weapons of mass-destruction.

We use pictures and find miraculous ways to send them, to show the wonder and beauty of the universe, and by that same means there are those who distribute inanities or what can only be described as moral degradation.

Sometimes, like the protest song: “Where have all the flowers gone?” we echo the refrain – “When will we ever learn?”

Sadly, it is almost as if humanity in each generation is re-inventing the wheel.

If you read Micah 6:8, it is as if you are reading the words of a frustrated and exasperated prophet:

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God?”

He is kind of saying: “Don’t you get it? Do you have to be told the same thing time and time again?”

So why do we keep having to burn our fingers to check that the stove is hot?

Mark Twain once said, “Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to!”

In today’s reading we see Jesus using parables to try and get the disciples, and to a degree the ever-listening crowds, to understand what it means to be the people of faith and its consequences.

Jesus is teaching the disciples using a series of parables and statements developed on a common theme. As such each story amplifies something said in the previous one, perhaps from a new perspective, or by adding some extra information, or giving it some fresh emotional force.

Preceding this parable, for example, is the “Parable of the Sower”, which, as Jesus explains, compares those who hear the word of God to the soils available for the word to grow in, and it climaxes with the harvest at the end of history.

This parable today explains further what this harvest will look like – in that it will be a time of judgement in which some are gathered into the barn, but others are condemned.

A question that arises for the disciples is: If good seed has been planted on the earth by God, where did the weeds come from?

And they themselves are saying: “If we are doing what you tell us, planting seeds of God’s goodness, how come bad stuff is all around us? “





And now that there are weeds among the good wheat, what do we do? Try and uproot the weeds?

The answer given by Jesus is: Let the wheat and the weeds grow together, side by side. In essence, this is life – where good and evil exist side by side.

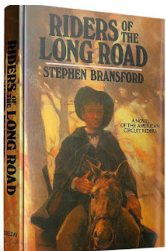
There are people in every neighbourhood, every school, every business, dare I say, every church, who are at times incredibly fruitful, and, at other times, seem to be incredibly destructive.

Just because one goes to church doesn't guarantee that they are wheat. Weeds infiltrate the body of the church.

So, we have to recognise that while we live in this world we are in the midst of a continual conflict, between good and evil – and it is nigh on impossible for us not to get caught up in it. It is the oldest conflict known to humankind – to be human is to be susceptible to this conflict.

It is no respecter of age, of gender, of learning, of wealth or achievement. No one can ever say that they are exempt from this conflict, and nor will we ever be old enough to retire from it.

It is this human story where we strive to do good – that is why we pray, study and try by God's grace to live good and purposeful lives.



There's a passage in Stephen Bransford's book *Riders of the Long Road*. It is set in the USA and is about a Circuit Rider, who was trying to explain God and evil to a young man with hard questions, including, "Why won't God finish off evil right now?"

The preacher pointed to some grass where they were sitting, "See this good grass? But then look at this pennyroyal – like the weeds in Jesus' story." He grabbed a stem of the pennyroyal and yanked it out of the ground. Dirt went flying and so did the good grass.

"You see, the roots of the grass and of the pennyroyal are all tangled under the ground. Just like us. We are a tangle of good and bad - all of us. If God destroyed evil, if God uprooted all that is sinful, God would end up doing a lot of damage to all of us."

Interestingly in the Middle East there is actually a very similar scenario whereby there is a weed which in its early stages looks just like wheat, but when it has grown to fullness it is easy to distinguish as a weed. The problem is that by then its roots have become so intertwined with the wheat, that you cannot extract it from the ground without tearing up the wheat.

Seems Jesus and the Circuit Rider notice the same thing about plant-life.

What is true of plant life seems also to be true of the saint and sinner within each of us. It is just like when we make a step forward we are always susceptible to slipping backwards. Just when we think we've got the stone, as it were, to the top of the mountain, it rolls down the other side.

I believe Paul was referring to this idea when he said in Romans:

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

We sow good seed when we worship God, we want a 'wheat' church, not one made up of those dastardly weeds. We read the Bible, are consistent in our devotional practices, do justice and act kindly, walking





each day with God. We experience spiritual beauty – and to our huge surprise, those same dastardly weeds appear.

Where do the weeds appear from when we have endeavoured to sow goodness, love, peace, and mercy? Ask yourself, how is it that we can be irritable at human actions after receiving the elements of the Lord's Supper?

Or, the preacher makes a good point, as I hope I am doing, and the thought arises in your head: 'Well, preacher, you're not so good yourself'. The seed hardly has time to germinate, before it is being choked out by the weeds.

The sad thing is that many people see the enormity of the struggle and quit. We can never take being a Christian for granted – being a disciple is a tough call.

It is a bit like Joshua being told by God that the land would belong to Joshua and the people – but they had to battle for it. It wasn't just handed on a plate.

So where do the weeds come from – an enemy? It is an enemy of goodness that sows seeds of chaos and confusion.

When we sow good seed in the world and expect a healthy crop of praiseworthy believers, what do we do about the weeds which appear in our midst?

This has been the struggle of the church throughout history. For indeed we would love to say that all who claim to be Christian were wonderfully exemplary in life and conduct. When it comes to other people – we are good at categorizing or judging others - to be honest we can find rather crude ways to distinguish between those we consider wheat and the weeds.

Some restrict membership of the church to folks we think are just like us, who dress by a certain code, who fulfil certain clear patterns such as how much they give, and

regular attendance at worship, music style, prayer styles, attending meetings, and so forth – if that were so it would be easy to distinguish who was wheat from weed.

But when the standard is about the heart and intent – then we are entering a realm that is in one sense beyond us, but in another, is actually all about us.

The advice given here is to forget about trying to judge by your own standards and leave those things to God and the angel reapers – the ones qualified to do this work.

St Augustine once said concerning the Lord's Field:

'At times what was grain turns to weeds and at times what were weeds turn into grain, and no one knows what they will be tomorrow.'

I did wonder what this parable is saying for us today?

Sometimes the church has those persons or types that it just wants to get rid of, because it wants to be a 100% all wheat church!

But you look at yourself, and if you are honest, you will admit that you are a tangle of wheat and weeds, and so is everyone else.

It always makes me smile when liberal factions in the church think they are wheat and the conservatives are weeds; whereas the conservatives are sure they are the wheat and the liberals are the weeds. Go figure!

Maybe Jesus loves us sticking together?!

Notice too when Jesus says the action of sowing the weeds happens – that the weeds were sown by the enemy when everyone was asleep.





That is when many of today's problems happen – while we are sleeping – not physical sleep because we need that – but morally asleep.

The enemy can only sow the weed seed when we are distracted or not paying attention to the horror of what is going on.

As Ellsworth Kalas observes: “It was said that during the rise of Adolf Hitler and the brutal destruction of the Jewish people that America slept. You think of a civilized world and can't relate to how such a thing happened.”

Children often go off track when parents are preoccupied with other issues – and this can include making a living and planning for the future. It is so easy for anyone to be asleep, and not paying attention – especially, it would seem, when materialistic attitudes intervene.

Likewise with our own lives, we can so easily be overcome by weeds when we are asleep. It is not the really tough times that cause the sleep, but in the ordinary and mundane that we fall asleep.

As Anton Chekov the playwright once said: “Any idiot can face a crisis, it is this day-to-day living that wears you out.”

The way one gets rid of the weeds is to stay awake, and remember that the one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man – who seeks to be passionately involved in all our lives to produce that which is good and righteous.

The battle is so cataclysmic that it will not be sorted out fully until the end of the age – the Last Judgment.

But it all hinges on this – what happens when everybody is asleep.

As one Bible commentator says: It is enough to keep you awake at night – or rather to get to the heart of the matter – it is enough to keep us awake during the day!

So – stay awake!

To God be the glory for ever. Amen.

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