

Living among the weeds

[Jesus] put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" (Matthew 13:24-30 ESV)

Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds could have been told about me and my saga with Charlotte's gardens over the years. In the past – note the time reference – I have been known to exuberantly clear away a designated area under instruction and still fail to spot clearly the plants to save and the plants to burn. Perhaps Jesus' parable is all about getting the right workers because I'm not sure it makes good horticultural sense, nor is it good practical advice to let both weeds and wheat grow their hardest in your paddock. In fact we rarely allow such things to happen in other parts of our lives. We deal with troublemakers, disruptive influences, bullies, and other assorted nasties in every group we're in – and the process is probably similar – try and get everyone to do the right thing – impose increasing levels of sanctions (with appropriate carrots and sticks along the way) and if pushed, finally separate the weed from the group by either expelling or imprisoning. Jesus' parable doesn't square with our usual way of living it seems.

Some parables appear to resonate with what we know and others less so. We don't have to struggle with this parable because the disciples ask Jesus for us.

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear." (Matthew 13:36-43 ESV)

Jesus gives us the time frame of this parable – from sowing to final harvest is the entire history of our planet – going as far back as you want and going as far forward as it will go. The harvest is clear cut – the weeds are burned – and the wheat, while not specifically harvested, grows and shines in the kingdom. There is a teaching here that at the end of the age, there will be a reckoning with sin and evil – the weeds will weep and gnash their teeth – and sin and evil will be no more. To all those people who think that God is some sort of doddering old grandfatherly softie – and especially to those who feel that this sort of god needs a hand in meting out perceived justice – the message is clear – God does not need our help with the end of the age or the final harvest (which is left to angelic utilization rather than human zeal). Even if you still get trapped by the thought that God is soft on sin then you need to look clearly at who God is – rather than our version of him – and for that we might look to the 'Son of Man'.

Jesus often described himself as the 'Son of Man' – a term that brought together images of power, majesty, and the apocalyptic – someone decisive in relation to God and people – yet someone ambiguous as if covered by a cloud – present and yet hidden. Jesus described this 'Son of Man' as the one who would be rejected, who would suffer, crucified, dead, and buried, and the one who would

rise from the dead. This Son of Man will send out the angels and he is not a soft option. There will be a reckoning – justice will be done – and righteousness will shine – the Son of Man will see to it.

And we can understand the disciples coming to Jesus asking, ‘When?’ and ‘How?’. Jesus’ parables confront us as we find ourselves in them somewhere. Where? In the world? Yes – Jesus said that the field is the world but that doesn’t mean that Jesus is describing how we are to live as the world’s citizens. You see, the parable describes the kingdom of God – a hidden reality on earth – and a visible one at the end of the age. The parable is not addressing us as a citizen of a country, as a member of a workforce, or as a particular gender. The parable is not interested in our nationality, our politics, our bank accounts, or our health. The parable addresses us as either good seed or weeds.

Seeds do not decide to be what they are. Their identity is a given. The apple seed cannot become an orange. The identity of the good seed is through the work of the Son of Man – he gives the seed its identity through his rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection. He goes through the judgement for us and he wants everyone to be saved. That is the good news you know – Jesus has died and risen again for you – comes to you today to bless and help. Sadly this is not the case for everyone on this planet for there is a mystery that human sin can and does rebel against God’s care and rescue. And the parable recognises this truth with its eternal perspective even though it is not what God desires for all of us.

So the parable speaks to the good seed and reminds them that they will live among weeds. They are not to uproot the weeds and they have no power to change the weeds and these two truths provide the parameters in which Christians live. Christians do not become hermits or convert people by force but they live in every country of this planet as members of the kingdom of God. Yes, they know the difference between right and wrong, legal and illegal, moral and immoral and can enter the debates and work for the good of the society – even as police, military, the judicial system – but always within the parameters of not doing God’s judging for him and of not doing God’s converting for him.

This is not a recipe for doing nothing as Christians. On the contrary it takes strength and commitment to live as good seed among the weeds and so bear ‘good fruit’ in a world where it is easy to go quiet, be anonymous, masquerade even as weeds. It takes a commitment to use the means of grace that God has given to us so that all humanity can meet Jesus and be saved – the wheat to have their faith strengthened and the weeds to become new creations in Christ.

I wonder whether Paul had this living among the weeds in mind when he wrote Romans 12 – he certainly saw Christian living as a sacrificial response to the One who sacrificed himself for us.

And so if you want a glimpse of how this parable can be lived out ...

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:9-21 ESV)

When you know the final outcome then the detail of the present suddenly comes into real focus.