

Dear Friends,

The gospel reading last Sunday was the parable of the sower. This week we are on similar ground with the parable of the weeds, a less familiar one that is only found in Matthew's gospel.

We all know about weeding and I doubt if there are many of us who really enjoy it. Weeding is one of the less pleasant tasks in the garden. It is hard work and for people like me it's difficult because I often can't tell what's a weed and what isn't. I did read some advice recently which said "When weeding, the best way to make sure you are removing a weed and not a valuable plant is to pull on it. If it comes out of the ground easily, it's a valuable plant."

It has often been said that weeds are simply flowers that are growing in the wrong place. That may be so but we also know there are some weeds that will take over the garden if they aren't dealt with. We can't simply ignore weeds, but they do need to be dealt with at the right time and in the right way.

The story Jesus told does seem rather a strange one. This idea of an enemy coming and planting weeds under cover of darkness seems somewhat farfetched. But there is a true story of a tenant farmer who had worked for years to improve the quality of the land. When it was time to renew the lease, the owner told him he was going to sell the farm to his son who was getting married. The tenant offered to buy it himself, but he couldn't get the owner to change his mind. Finally his anger got the better of him and he collected the worst weeds he could find and scattered them all over the farm. The very next morning the owner came and told him that his son's wedding was off and he was happy to renew the lease. He couldn't understand why the farmer was so annoyed.

The weed in the parable was a particular weed called darnel, it was poisonous so it couldn't just be harvested with the grain. When it's young darnel looks exactly like wheat, they are indistinguishable, so it can't be removed. By the time it looks different, the plants are so intertwined that you couldn't pull up the weeds without destroying the entire crop.

Sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish between good and evil. Alexander Solzhenitsyn said "If only there were evil people committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." This story is a warning not to pass judgement on others, it isn't up to us to decide. We do often pass judgement, if people don't meet up to our standards or expectations. C. S. Lewis wrote that when people become Christians there's a danger that the outward sins of lying, cheating and stealing are replaced by the inward one of judging others.

At the time of Jesus some groups like the Pharisees and the Qumran community were very closed and clearly defined, everyone knew who was in and who was out. But the disciples weren't like that, they were a very open and fluid group, they didn't even have a name or a title. They didn't have clear boundaries like the Pharisees, there were much more fuzzy boundaries. That should be true of the church as well. This parable teaches us about being open and welcoming. We should be more concerned about welcoming people in, it isn't our job to decide who's in and who isn't.

With best wishes,

Mark