

**A Sermon Preached at Christ Church Cathedral Newcastle on the Fifth Sunday
after Pentecost**

The Dean of Newcastle, The Very Reverend Dr James Rigney

Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

Human hearts are mysterious things and hasty judgment is dangerous. That is a good lesson of which to be reminded and it is part of the lesson of this morning's gospel.

Throughout his ministry we see Jesus prohibiting judgement in his teaching: as for example in Matthew 7:1-5. He was frequently in conflict with the Scribes and Pharisees over their persistent judging of people and their attempt to control the minutiae of others' lives.

This morning's parable is a parable about the field, not just about the crops that grow in it. It is a parable about a collective experience. It should be interpreted as a comment on the collective experience of the whole world; or a whole congregation; or a whole person - in all cases we find an unavoidable, inseparable mixture of good and bad, wheat and weeds sown together. According to this parable, we should expect that to be true; and we should not expect that God is going to come and take out all the bad things and make everything and everyone wholly good and pure.

Although Jesus urges patience he never suggests that the faithful should rejoice in or be indifferent to the presence of weeds and the effects of that presence. There's no delight in this kind of sabotage and God's forbearance is no excuse for laxity or indifference on the part of those who have responsibility for the field. The weeds are endured patiently, but with groaning, a part of that "groaning for redemption" that Saint Paul says the whole created order shares. God has promised to deliver his own.

These parables in this section of Matthew's gospel are kingdom parables – parables about what the kingdom of heaven will be like. But this particular parable this morning begins with a picture not of the kingdom but of the world. Both the farm and the kingdom in this present age present a mixture in which the good and the bad

are mingled together. In the end both farm and kingdom are subjected to a cleansing and a sifting process.

St Augustine wrote that,

In this wicked world and in these evil times, the Church through her present humiliation is preparing for the future exaltation. She is being trained by the stings of fear, the tortures of sorrow, the distresses of hardship, and the dangers of temptation; and she rejoices only in expectation, when her joy is wholesome. In this situation, many reprobates are mingled in the Church with the good, and both sorts are collected, as it were, in the dragnet of the gospel; and in this world, as in a sea, both kinds swim without separation, enclosed in nets until the shore is reached.¹

For the world the parable of the wheat and the weeds is a story about impatience. For the disciples to whom the fuller understanding is given it is a parable about imagining the kind of community that they and we are meant to be.

In this morning's gospel we are told that the enemy, Satan, sowed the weeds among the wheat 'and went away'. The problem of the weeds thus becomes the problem of the farmer and his servants. It is they who need to make a judgment about how to deal with the problem posed by the weeds.

Finding some weeds among the wheat would not be unexpected: it is the profusion and the threat posed by the weeds that causes concern for the servants. And the servants are just that, they are not the owner himself but those employed by him – but their concern and responsibility is such that they want to take action. Moreover the workers can recognize the difference between the weeds and the wheat. The type of weed that Jesus refers to is one that is hard to distinguish from wheat until it is fully grown and begins to shoot. But here the workers can already see the difference – and they seek guidance about what they should do.

¹ Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* Translated by Henry Bettenson; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977, p. 831

We read that the sabotage happened while the people sleep. This is probably not to criticize them for sleeping but to emphasize that the enemy acts in secret – and that the results of his action only become apparent as the plants grow. The weeds are intertwined at the root level: to pull up one is to uproot the other. Although they grow together one is fundamentally unfruitful – the weed bears no fruit and the weed contains no good outcome.

The New Testament is remarkably frank in recounting the Church's failures. Among the chosen twelve there was a betrayer. Cheats and extortioners sat within the apostles' fellowship. The leaders quarrelled; scandals broke out among the laity. When Christ judges the seven churches of Asia in the Book of Revelation, he has more condemnation than approval to bestow.

There is a tendency to think that disagreement and conflict are incompatible with thriving. That tendency is to think that the church ought to be a place where conflict does not happen. The church, so this tendency tempts us to believe, is a place where holiness reigns, fights do not occur and everyone shares equally in the joy of Christian life. The simple reason for the prevalence of this thought is that it is at least somewhat true: a community cannot have on-going murmuring and fighting and thrive.

In some ways, this position is understandable. Christian discipleship, so Christians have always thought, should and actually does make a difference for the life of a community or institution. Christians are supposed to grow in holiness, for example, and no amount of serious reckoning with the reality of sin should suggest otherwise. The problem, however, is that this aversion to conflict can all too easily over-spiritualize the church and refuse to recognize its materiality, its provisionality that shows itself in everyday, real life. That is why this set of parables is so rooted in the material world, of seeds and crops and yeast.

Perhaps the most famous example in the New Testament which illustrates the incorporation of conflict into the life of the community is the Jerusalem Council described in Acts chapter fifteen. The issue at stake in that council was whether

Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved (and by extension, therefore, whether they had to keep the Jewish law to put into effect the salvation given by Jesus).

At this distance from the first century, it can be difficult for us to appreciate how important an issue this was to the early Christians. But it was nothing less than the first real theological issue in the emerging church, and it threatened its unity at the core (and for confirmation of that we need only note Paul's vehemence in his letter to the Galatians).

There are three elements to the way in which the passage shows the processing of disagreement and conflict. First, there is the experience of the Spirit (as recounted by Peter, then Paul and Barnabas). Second, there is the agreement of the Spirit's work with Scripture (shown in James' citation from the prophet Amos). Third, there is a structure of ecclesial authority (James and the apostles have definitive weight in the final decision).

Yet such elements are not given as a set of steps fashion, as if a community could always progress from the experience of the Spirit to the decision of the leaders. These three elements are instead indispensable parts of one complex and unified picture. Precisely because Acts tells the story of the Jerusalem Council by means of interplay between them, we can see that all three are needed to give us as Christians and as members of Christian communities the ability to incorporate deep conflict. To thrive, according to Acts, is already to know that decisions of great theological weight and importance may well hang on our ability to acknowledge deep conflict and respond to its presence with discerning wisdom.

Return to this morning's gospel is to be reminded that before holiness and perfection however, Jesus expected transformation in his hearers. He knew that hearing the good news of the unconditional acceptance of God, has a way of transforming our natures as we discover that religion isn't about rules, it is about relationships. This is a process. That is why Jesus uses organic images to describe the process of the divine field (Kingdom of God) coming to fruition in the lives of people and their communities. He speaks in this gospel passage of the divine field operating as growing wheat amongst weeds; as yeast leavening dough; as a small

mustard seed transforming into a tree large enough to accommodate a colony of birds.

This process isn't flawless nor is it conducted in clinically sanitised environments. Wheat grows in the presence of competing and threatening weeds. Crucially there is a difference between active waiting and passive waiting. Active waiting is more like anticipating. We're expectant. We're preparing. We are on watch and getting ready. Passive waiting is doing nothing.

As so often it is how we look at the gospel that determines what we see. This morning's gospel is not simply a warning about weeds it is a reminder that we are intended to be wheat, growing from the word of God that has found good soil in us. If that is where we come from then we have the capacity, and the responsibility to cope with the weeds in whose presence we are growing.