

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

Many years ago, when we had our first house, I wanted to create a garden. The first thing I planted was a row of sunflowers. If you’ve seen the young plants, there are not much to look at – they have rather rough stems and leaves. They were about 12 inches high, and I was very proud of my plants. I didn’t have much time, working full time, so my mother-in-law came over to visit and to help us in the house. When I came home one day I discovered that every single one of my sunflowers had disappeared. I was distraught. We discussed it. My mother-in-law thought they were weeds, and had pulled up all of them, and piled them on the compost heap. Whenever I read today’s parable, I remember those plants, which did not have a chance to show us how beautiful they could be.

There are many lessons to be learnt from today’s gospel reading, and one of them is about being too quick to judge. My mother-in-law didn’t plant my sunflowers and didn’t know what they were. And maybe that’s the point Jesus is making. We often don’t know. It’s sometimes difficult to distinguish the wheat from the weeds, whether they’re in the back garden or the garden of our life, until the plants are mature. I’ve noticed while driving around here, that in some fields, there are a few green weeds growing among the golden wheat. They are very apparent now, but were not when the wheat was also green.

Jesus says in today’s parable that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field, and while people slept, his enemy came and sowed darnel weeds. Jesus mentioned that weed because in its early stages it closely resembles wheat, so it’s not easy to identify. As the plants mature the roots of the two plants intertwine and are impossible to separate. But the darnel is bitter and toxic, so cannot be eaten. It may sound farfetched to us, that anyone would deliberately plant weeds, but it was not so then. Sowing darnel seeds was a common act of sabotage in Roman times; they even had a law against it.

In this parable, Jesus explains its meaning, as he did in last week’s parable. At the disciples’ request he says, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸ the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age.”

On the face of it, this parable is quite straightforward. It’s about judgment, and that good and evil can exist together. We may be more inclined to convert the weeds, and turn it into a parable about evangelism. Jesus certainly talks about conversion elsewhere, but not here. So, you have a field full of wheat and weeds, all growing together. Should you try and pull up the weeds? No, says the farmer, because you could damage the wheat. Leave it until the harvest and then the wheat can be sorted from the weeds.

The parable tells us that the Kingdom must contend with evil all around it, and that God permits evil and good to co-exist until the end. Then comes judgement day when the angels “will throw (the evil ones) ~~them~~ into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” This beautiful image comes from Daniel 12:3, which says, “Those who are wise shall shine as the brightness of the expanse; and those who turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever.”

So, God will deal with the bad ones in the harvest. It’s not up to us to judge. And we cannot assume that just because we are all here today, that we are all the righteous who will shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father.

So, should we ignore evil amongst us? Should we interpret this parable as prohibiting discipline in the church and in the world? In Matthew 18, Jesus gives a highly specific way of dealing with sin, within the church at least (18:15-17). The church also does well to apply the principle of forbearance to those outside the church. The church’s greatest sins - the Inquisition, witch hunts, and pogroms against Jews, have been committed in the interest of purifying the world. When we use violence to spread the Gospel, we do violence to the Gospel. This parable then, emphasizes patience, tolerance, and divine justice, teaching that God alone will sort out the righteous from the wicked at the end of the age.

Clearly Jesus is saying that we can’t just dispose of our opponents, so what should we do?

The theologian, John Stott, talked about the two extremes, imposing your views on people or, alternatively, laissez faire – letting people do whatever they want. Neither way is good, he argued. Instead, he suggested a way of addressing the issue. Remember when Jesus said to his followers – you are the light of the world. He continued, ‘People don’t light a lamp and then hide it under a bowl. They put it on a stand, so it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so that they may see your good deeds and glorify God.’ In other words, get yourselves out of the church building and into society so that through your words and deeds people can visualize what the kingdom of God is all about. We need Christians in local politics and business and education and the caring professions and volunteering, modelling with integrity this kingdom way of living, and of course also in the family.

The reality is that good and bad will always exist, and we must accept that reality.

Unlike God, we cannot know people’s hearts, or where their lives might take them, or their potential for redemption. God has not equipped us with the insight necessary to weed the garden. As wonderful as it would be to have a “pure” world, a world without sinners, Jesus tells us that only in the harvest will purity be possible. Attempts to achieve it now will prove disastrous. It will destroy the good with the bad. Reapers will accomplish the separation at harvest-time. In God’s scheme of things, soon enough.

We can describe evildoers as those who practice *anomia*—literally *a* (without) *nomos* (law); in other words, evildoers are the lawless. Those who rebel against God’s law, those who practice immoral and unethical living and those who don’t care what Jesus wants them to do. Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love God and neighbour. So, the lawless must include those who do not love God and neighbour.

And the greatest commandment is in fact the Good News that Jesus tells us. The greatest commandment is to love God and love our neighbour. Then our faces will shine like the sunflowers. And then we will be the children of the Kingdom.

Thanks be to God.