

Sermon 23/07/23

Sorting the wheat from the weeds

Recently we were telling the parable of the sower to the children at Widney School as part of Open the Book. As children very much after the agricultural revolution, born in the age of mechanised planting, we had to explain how seed would be sown in Biblical times, and why so much of it went onto the wrong places. On the face of it today's gospel passage – the wheat and the weeds – is similarly of its time.

The story is very simple. The farmer sows his wheat, an enemy introduces weed seeds and both crops begin to grow. The farm workers are keen to remove the weeds to allow the wheat to flourish but the farmer stops them in case they also pull out the young wheat plants. 'Wait for the harvest', he tells them, 'We will sort the weeds out then and destroy them.'

Jesus then goes on to explain to the disciples the meaning of this parable. He is the farmer and the weeds are sown by Satan. The crops are people, good and bad, influenced by the forces of good and evil. Although it is intuitive to remove the 'weeds' as soon as they appear the danger of removing a seedling that will grow into something good is very real and so we are urged to wait. To reserve judgement until we can see what the outcome really is. In the meantime, the sinner, who appeared to be a weed, may have changed and become part of the crop to be harvested.

It is only at the time of the harvest that we can see the whole picture and truly know which are the weeds and which the wheat crop.

There are many examples in the Bible of people waiting, of outcomes that seemed unlikely. Just how patient was Noah waiting on the ark for the flood to go – it may have stopped raining but the first time he sent out the dove it could find no trees to perch on, he had to wait longer before it brought him the olive branch. The old testament women, Sarah and Hannah, waiting to have children. Abraham we remember, found it hard to believe that childless as he was, he could father the nations of the world. With only a small early picture how hard it is to see the whole.

One of the big stories of the Bible is about the Jewish nation waiting for their Messiah to be born. Time and again we read of the expectation that the Messiah will come as some sort of warlord and take the land by force. What happened? Well, there was a baby. A baby born not into a palace or even a family of fighters, but to humble beginnings. For the next thirty years there is only one incident that hinted of the future. True the Messiah did enter Jerusalem in triumph, but that led to a criminal's death rather than a palatial celebration. And the message of the man that the baby became was not of war and force but of love and kindness.

But when God's plan was revealed in its fulfilment, when it became possible to see that the baby who grew into a man of peace was more powerful than if he had grown into a man of war. When we could see the spread of Christianity through the world and the ages.

How much more convincing is that than an all conquering battle worn hero.

We only had to wait to see the big picture.

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There I was sitting on the downstairs back seat of the bus on my way home from work when we stopped for a ticket check. Two inspectors got on, looked at our tickets and passes, removed a couple of people who couldn't find the right ones and we were about to set off again. But no. A young policeman and an eager dog got onto the bus – it's the drugs dog. He bounded eagerly to the back of the bus and has a good sniff of my bag. People in front of me are nudging each other, turning heads and I can feel them thinking, 'Well I wouldn't have thought it of her'. And I know that they expect me to be escorted off the bus.

What they missed was the dog handler who as they approached mouthed at me, 'He always starts at the back'. With only part of the picture, the other passengers had reached the wrong conclusion. I stayed on the bus and went home for my tea.

This story of the wheat and the weeds has a decidedly modern spin to it. Modern farming wisdom is recognising the benefits of a 'cover

crop'. A crop that will give nothing productive to harvest but whose presence in the field serves to protect the main crop when young and importantly to improve the soil. This is done partly by preventing soil erosion and partly due to the cover crops roots breaking up the lumps, keeping air in the soil and providing organic matter. It is not a short term solution but for the long term quality, and productivity, of the soil. The bigger picture.

Now I know people who pride themselves on their ability to judge character at a first meeting. That is not me. I need to see someone in different situations, not just when they may be trying to portray a specific image. To see the whole person. Not least so that I don't judge them simply on the characteristics I particularly value, punctuality and plain speaking. I have had to learn that diplomacy and a little lateness are not necessarily bad. To look at the whole person before I judge.

In modern life where there appear to be some thoughts that we should know everything about everybody and where electronic communication allows information to flow quickly the dangers of not seeing the whole are magnified. The media will take up a 'scandalous' story and run it with exaggerated headlines for a few days. It will be some time before we can read the real facts and form our own views - if we ever can. But in my experience allegations about anything contain some truth, some untruth and a lot of misunderstanding. It is only when the whole story becomes clear that we can form a rational view.

In the story that Jesus told he has the farmer resisting the temptation to remove anything that might be a weed because he

knows that whatever the seeding is like it may grow into a valuable crop. If we follow that example we will wait until we can see the bigger picture before we pass judgement.