

WEEDS AMONG THE WHEAT

Pentecost 7 Year A

Gn. 28:10-19; Ps. 139:1-12,23-24; Rom. 8:12-25; Mt. 13:24-30,36-43 Glad 19/07/2020

I don't know if you've ever noticed it, but weeds are pernicious things. Just when things are starting to look good in the garden, up come the weeds, as if to say, "Hi! Thought you'd got rid of us, didn't you. Ha ha!" It doesn't matter how well you prepare the soil, or what incantations you make over the new seeds that you've just planted—as soon as the seedlings begin to grow, so do the weeds. It's like they just sit there in the ground and wait for you to plant something nice and then decide to grow at the same time—just to spoil your fun. Something to do with Murphy's Law, I think.

And of course, you can't do anything about the weeds then, can you? it's too late, because, when you try to pull them up, you end up decimating your own plants. The only thing to do is to wait until your own plants are strong enough and then seek out and destroy the weeds—pulling them up by their pernicious little roots or engaging every (male) gardener's favorite tool, Roundup. Then, when your nice plants are finished, you prepare the soil for the next batch of seeds and the cycle begins all over again.

In the parable of the Weeds, in today's reading from the gospel, we find very a similar situation—one that ancient farmers were very familiar with—but instead of the weeds growing amongst the wheat, by themselves, there's an added drama. An enemy has come in and sown them, deliberately.

Jesus tells us that, like many others, this is a parable of the Kingdom. It explains, in some way, some aspect of the Kingdom of God. It uses much of the same images that were present in the parable of the sower, which I'm sure you're all familiar with. This time, however, it looks at planting in a different context. The seed that's sown this time, is not the Word of God, but the children of the kingdom—those who have already responded positively to the Word of God.

Jesus' intention in the telling of this parable is to give the people "food for thought", as it were, literally. The concept is that of Jesus placing the parable before them as mental entertainment, much the same as you would place enticing food before a person for their enjoyment. But again, as was the case with the previous parable, Jesus does not explain its meaning to the crowd.

The weeds described here, were probably a wheat-like grass that was virtually indistinguishable from wheat until the wheat began to develop ears. It's common in the Mediterranean region and its effect on the wheat, apart from being a nuisance, was likely to have caused a fungal growth on the wheat, which was poisonous, if eaten. So, it was pretty serious stuff.

In the light of this, again, we can ask ourselves, as did the disciples, what is the meaning of this parable. What does it tell us about the Kingdom of God and how should we respond to it? We are fortunate, that, in this text, we have a window into Jesus' explanation. Some of the implications for us, however, still need to be examined.

Once again, as so many of the parables are, the parable of the weeds is set within the context of judgement.

There is always something sobering about discussions that focus on the negative aspects of judgement—who undergoes it and what will the outcomes be? Jesus talked a lot about judgement and no more explicitly than here, within these so-called parables of the Kingdom. But it just doesn't do, to focus too much on the questions of "how" and "when", because those aspects are known only to God.

What *is* of paramount importance to us, though, is the assurance we have in God's Word, that God's judgement of the world is a sure thing. There's no question, explicit or implicit, which contemplates whether or not there will be a judgement. The Scriptures assure us that there *will* be a judgement and everyone will be there. And as a consequence of that judgement, there *will* be a harvest.

If we were to look more closely at what the New Testament tells us about this judgement, we see, in fact, that it is the Christians who will be judged first—not a particularly happy thought. The Scriptures are clear that those who have received the most revelation, have greater responsibility. And so, they will be judged more harshly.

However, in the case of *this* particular parable, judgement is being pronounced on those that cause others to stumble—those that mix with the faithful and who, through their own deceptive witness cause others to fall away from that which Christ has revealed to them—who thereby cause division and disunity among the faithful.

The parable assures us, however, and fortunately for us, that this evil is temporary—only that which is good will endure. Like the weeds that are tolerated for a while, for the sake of the good plants, evil is tolerated for a while for the sake of the good. We see this analogy throughout the history of the Hebrew people. God’s judgement on the people has always been withheld for the sake of the faithful.

And so, because we can be confident that the harvest is sure, the Parable leads us to a point of joy and hope. The question implied in this parable, therefore, is not now, “What kind of soil are you?”, but, “What kind of *seed* are you?”. “Are you the good seed sown by Jesus Christ or are you the evil seed sown by Satan?”

I have often heard comparisons made between the church and the world, that are characterized, by an attitude of “us” and “them”—“us Christians” and “those pagans”. While it’s true that some sort of distinctions are necessary and appropriate, we tend, too often, to see ourselves as a class apart from the rest of the world, or at least, separated from the sinfulness of the world. But, those in the church are just as much a part of the world as those outside of it. And sin affects us all.

The distinctions that *are* given to us in this parable, relate to the fact that it’s the disciples, and consequently the church, to whom the understanding of the parable is given. And it is to the church, that the understanding of the Word of God is given.

In the world that we live in, good is mixed in with bad—we see it all around us—not just the church mixed in with the world, but both bad and good within the world, within the church and within each of us. The ultimate example of this occurred in the life of Christ, himself, where Judas, the one that was to betray Jesus, lived among the disciples—the twelve who were chosen to be foremost participants in the ministry of Jesus.

When it comes time for the final harvest, the bad, who will become apparent at that time, will be separated from the good and will be destroyed, for while ever there is a mixture of good and bad, the characteristics of both will be blurred. The harvest will be just like the emergence of the sun from behind a cloud.

This parable goes on, then, to be a reminder that it’s not the job of the church, to get rid of the weeds. It’s not up to us to weed that particular garden. How I wish that were so in the

domestic field—in our own back yard gardens. But no, that job is solely the responsibility of Jesus Christ, whose angels, we are told, will do the collecting of the weeds—all the sin and evil of this world—and will destroy it. Too often we stand in judgement of those, both inside and outside the church, rather than being careful and diligent in our own response to the Word of God.

When taken as a whole, then, we discover that the parable of the weeds is not just about judgement—it's a call to respond. It's not a guarantee of success, but it is a call to respond, nevertheless, to the grace and mercy of God found in his Word.

At this point, it would be very easy to celebrate the anticipated success of the church in the final judgement. Surely we, the church, have nothing to fear. But, lest we get too exultant or complacent, we should understand the true thrust of the parable. Rather than guaranteeing our individual success, or the success of the church, at the judgement, the parable calls the church to a faithful response to the Word of God, as it is given to us in and through Jesus Christ.

In doing this, we may have our own set of difficulties. Jesus' concept of the Kingdom of God may challenge our traditional expectations. When Jesus told these parables, he was cutting across many of the traditional Jewish understandings of what constituted the kingdom of God, as well as what constituted its membership. Also, we need to remember that the parables are about the Kingdom, not the church. It's very easy to see the church or ourselves as the focus of the parable. We betray our own self-righteousness, however, when we identify ourselves as only the good elements in the parable.

The parable of the weeds, speaks of the final victory of the Kingdom of God, despite all appearances, and it challenges the church to respond to its message, rather than find in it, the guarantee of its own success.

The focus, as always, is on how we ought to respond to the dynamic Word of God, revealed to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. How do we respond to the message of the wheat and the weeds? What kind of seed are you?

To God be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.