

The story of the wheat and the weeds is an enigmatic little parable. In the first place it is a parable about the kingdom of heaven, that hidden, treasured reality that is the outpouring of grace and potential, through which the love of God becomes actual and real and concrete in creation and human affairs. In this parable in Matthew chapter 13, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field. So, following the parable of the sower last week, there is the theme of seed as potential from God. And there is a field, indicating a context within which growth and flourishing can take place. In contrast to the parable of the sower, however, this time the seed does not fall on alternative patches of ground, rather, there is one field sown with good seed. The challenge here is 'weeds', and these weeds don't choke the growing seed (as in the parable of the sower), they simply grow up with it. Yet they pose a dilemma. Something else is going on....

When the disciples ask for an explanation of the parable, Jesus answers that, "the one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels." We see then that the parable, as well as being about the kingdom of heaven, is about *the existence and the threat of evil*, in amongst the wheat. There is also the issue of judgement. The fact that the enemy came at night, hidden from view, heightens the drama of the struggle between good and evil that is going on in this parable. Like the snake in the garden creeping into the lives of Adam and Eve, craftily beguiling them, here evil takes on the cloak of darkness indicating its surreptitious arrival and unsuspected impingement. One of the questions posed by this parable therefore is, 'if evil gets in like this, how is it to be tackled and rooted out'? Enter the servants.... because the servants want to cut the weeds down. "Do you

want us to go and gather them”, they say. The puzzlement of this parable is, then, that the one who sowed the good seed, the Son of Man, does not want the weeds taken out. But why?! Why leave wheat and weeds growing up together when the weeds can't be doing any good and are only taking valuable nutrients away from the wheat?

My commentary suggests that there are two issues here, a concern for the return of Jesus and the harvest as the judgement – and we should remember that Matthew is keen on judgement, mostly because he is very keen on righteousness. It is possible that the servants want to pull out the weeds because they think that when Jesus returns he will want to be greeted by a field of fine, faithful wheat – without nasty weeds around to spoil the effect. The desire to extract the weeds may also reflect their instinct for good husbandry. No self-respecting agricultural worker wants their work to look shoddy or second rate – especially when the big boss is inspecting. And our sympathies are surely with the servants here....

Another part of this may also be that if the weeds stand for the achievements of the evil one, and here are the weeds standing out in the crop being tended by the servants, are the servants then going to be deemed to be responsible for the evil themselves? Are they going to be branded evil servants because of the presence of so many weeds? If there is any suggestion that this might be the case, or could be interpreted as such, we can see why the servants might want the weeds out of the way – before they are found guilty of complicity in evil!... This line of thinking may, however, be a little speculative, since in the parable, the devil is clearly singled out as the one responsible for the evil. Yet there is always the issue of who the devil may choose to work through, and there is also the lingering worry that none of us is free from the taint of self interest or greed or seeking advantage or saving face. Keeping the house clean (or keeping a field free of weeds) is a good way of attempting to project a veneer of virtue. The reality is that the good and the not so good in our hearts and lives exist and have their impact in ways we can

scarcely control, let alone conceal. This parable suggests that we can never afford to be complacent about the influence of evil.

The principal feature of the parable is that the weeds remain. Evil persists! The one who sows the good seed, the Son of Man, decides that this should be so; which brings us to the judgement i.e. the harvest at the end of the age. This is the time, the parable says, when *the wheat and the weeds can be known for what they are*, and be either gathered into barns or burnt, like chaff. But still we might press the question, why wait for the harvest? Why risk the impingement of evil when it need not be tolerated? What my commentary suggests, is that if we think of the field as the world, the world we live in, and it contains wheat and weeds, and there is a risk that if you pull up the weeds you may potentially pull up wheat as well, we gain a picture of the world as a place in which the good and the bad are all tangled up together, vying for the ascendancy – something we recognise, that we have identified already. The good and the not so good live both outside us and within us. One possibility is that in so far as the wheat and the weeds are not being pulled apart, and the weeds pulled out, this is because *they are not necessarily always so easily distinguishable*. This then gives grounds for leaving the weeds in place and waiting for the precise judgement of the angels at the end of the age. If this observation is indeed relevant, I wonder if there is an echo here of the story of the sheep and the goats, Matthew's great judgement story. For in a Middle Eastern setting, sheep and goats are not so easy to tell apart. Therefore in that parable of the judgement there is a decision to be made which might fall either way over those who either have or have not attended to the hungry, the naked and the prisoners. We may think we are on one side or another, but we may be in for a surprise!

Another matter is that we know very well our propensity as human beings for making poor judgements about other people. We have a remarkable capacity, for example, for seeing the good in ourselves and the not so

good in others, and not seeing the good in others whilst overlooking the less flattering in ourselves. As the parable of the speck and the log tells us, we see the speck in another's eye whilst failing to register the log in our own! Since, then, our judgements are not always either accurate or generous, might we not be prone to pulling out what we have judged to be weeds, when actually they are seedlings of wheat?!

If we pursue this line of thinking, of the unreliability of human judgements, it would be natural to conclude that the reason that the sower, the Son of Man, leaves the wheat and the weeds until harvest, is that it is actually only God who can judge justly, for only God really knows the wheat from the weeds.... There is however another possibility, which I warm to, which is that the wheat and weeds are left in the ground because the Son of Man wants to give plenty of time for the wheat to prove itself as wheat, and for the weeds to show their true colours. This allows also for something not spoken of in the parable, which is repentance. The artifice of waiting allows the possibility that weeds become wheat! This would seem to be in keeping with the values and mercy of the Son of Man. On this reckoning, there is a space opened up, that maybe lasts a lifetime, for people to learn the way of righteousness – time for goodness to flourish, time for repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation – a fresh start for everyone. The will of the Son of Man is that by harvest time there will be as much wheat as possible. If this is a parable about weeding out evil, we learn from it that in a world of good and evil jostling for prominence, the Son of Man seeks to maximise the opportunity for people to choose the good and learn the way of righteousness. And this is a primary Matthean theme, the concern with righteousness. It runs through the Beatitudes and resonates beyond. “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you.” And this very parable concludes with the words, “then the righteous shall shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”

Weeding out evil is not a simple matter. The plain sense of the parable, that the wheat must be allowed to flourish unhindered, tells us that nothing can or should prejudice the potential of the kingdom of heaven. Not even the devil and the children of the evil one. There is however a problem, which is that if evil is allowed to persist for too long it may indeed come to threaten or undermine the great potential of the kingdom of heaven. Our parable of the wheat and the weeds does not deal with this issue, however. We need the help of other passages, such as the little episode of the return of the unclean spirit to the house from which it was once expelled (Matt 12 v.43-45). Finding it swept and clean but unguarded, the spirit “brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself and they enter and live there; and the last state of the person is worse than the first.” This tells us that we cannot lack vigilance over the destructive power of evil.

An example of this may perhaps lie behind the awful tragedy at Grenfell Tower – although it may be too early to judge, and we know that we should be careful about biased, hasty judgements. But, it would appear that as a result of a whole collection of poor decisions and oversights, ranging potentially from the ill-considered to the downright irresponsible, a terrible situation came about in which cladding that was supposed to be for insulation, and the best interests of residents (as I understand it), came to be a devastatingly deadly firetrap. In amongst the entanglement of the good and the not so good, insufficient attention was clearly paid to weeding out the cumulative evils of misjudgement, disinterest, self-interest, avoidance, greed and disregard. What is most frightening is that this sort of posture is probably more common than we would wish for. Perhaps the message of the two parables together is to say that, whereas weeds will exist alongside the wheat in almost every context of our lives, and we should not let ourselves be diverted from the good work of the kingdom into giving quarter to evil, nevertheless, if we do not attend to the

effects of the weeds among the wheat, judgement may fall prematurely,
and the cost may be very great indeed.

1979 Words
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