

The Weeds and the Wheat

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Readings: **Matthew 13:24-30,36-43** (Year A Proper 11)

One of the big questions that all religions have to deal with is the existence of evil in the world. We want to know that the universe runs according to the principle of justice. If bad people get their comeuppance, fair enough. But why should the innocent suffer?

In Christianity, it can be put like this: If God is all powerful and all loving, why does he allow bad things to happen to people who don't deserve it? The parable of the wheat and the weeds addresses this issue.

The servants of the farmer know that the seed that he has sown was good seed. And yet there are weeds growing among the wheat. They ask the farmer if he would like them to pluck out the weeds, but he replies that they would risk plucking up the wheat by mistake. Much better, he says, to wait until harvest time, and the reapers can sort out the wheat from the weeds then.

A little botanical information will help us to understand the story in its own terms. The word translated "weeds" ("tares" in the King James Version) probably refers to a weed called darnel, which apparently originates in Syria, and which looks very similar to wheat but is poisonous, due to a fungus which often infects it. An article in Wikipedia says that

The similarity between these two plants is so great that in some regions, darnel is referred to as "false wheat". It bears a close resemblance to wheat until the ear appears... The wheat will also appear brown when ripe, whereas the darnel is black.¹

This explains why the farmer wanted to wait until the plants were fully grown, when it would be easier to tell the one from the other.

This parable is one of several in Matthew chapter 13 which use the image of growing plants to illustrate truths about the Kingdom of God. In all of them, there is a sense that the Kingdom has not yet been fully realised or completed. There is still much growing to be done. And yet in due course God will see a harvest. So another message in the parable seems to be that we must be prepared to be patient and let God work out his purposes in his own good time.

Making sense of the parable

Like many of Jesus' parables, there are several levels at which we can interpret this story. Jesus may be addressing those of his own followers, and people around him generally, who are impatient for God to act to bring about justice and punish the wicked. The oppression which the Romans were inflicting on the Jews would have been in some people's minds; others may have been more angry at the corruption that existed amongst the Jewish priestly ruling class. There were certainly those who were ready to take up arms to purge the nation of everything they saw as

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lolium_temulentum accessed 22 July 2017

wrong, just like the servants in the story wanted to root out the weeds.

On another level, we could think about some of the readers of Matthew's gospel, some 50 years after the resurrection of Jesus, who were concerned about complacency, corruption or worldliness in the church, and were all too keen to identify who was a "true Christian" and who was not. And we also might be tempted to think about today's church in similar ways, and be critical of people who don't seem to be living up to what we consider to be the high standards of discipleship: those, for example, who don't come to church but want their child baptised, or want to be married in church. Perhaps Jesus' words in Matthew chapter 7 have a particular resonance here: *Do not judge, so that you may not be judged* (Matt 7:1 NRSV).

It is a human tendency to compare ourselves with others. Some of us try to make ourselves feel better by paying attention to other people's failings; and some of us seem only to notice the ways in which other people are *better* than ourselves, which reinforces our own sense of inadequacy. But are we really in a position to objectively judge the moral worth of others or ourselves? In the parable, the servants of the farmer are warned that if they start interfering with the growing plants they may well root out wheat instead of darnel by mistake. Better to wait till the harvest, that is, the judgement day, when *God* will sort everything out. What you think is darnel may turn out to be wheat, and vice versa. God is a much better judge of character than we are. And when we think of the fact that

we too will be judged by God, then we may be inclined to be more humble about ourselves and more generous towards others.

There is also a wider application, which we can see from the interpretation of the parable in verses 36-43. Here Jesus interprets the weeds as representing not only “all evildoers” but also “all causes of sin” (13:41). There is something about the state of the world itself which is corrupted, resulting in evil deeds being committed. And we shouldn’t think that this is all just due to an unfortunate series of coincidences: the work of the “enemy”, i.e. the devil, can plainly be seen behind the evil that spoils the world and brings such unhappiness into people’s lives.

People often want to know why God doesn’t just intervene when he sees evil things happening, or stop them altogether? But how much do we really want God to be micro-managing the world? Tom Wright, a leading New Testament scholar and former Bishop of Durham, has some helpful comments on this.

The parable, he says, shows

“that God’s sovereign rule over the world isn’t quite such a straightforward thing as people sometimes imagine. Would people really like it if God were to rule the world directly and immediately, so that our every thought and action were weighed, and instantly judged and if necessary punished, in the scales of his absolute holiness? If the price of God stepping in and stopping a campaign of genocide were that he would also have to rebuke and restrain every other evil impulse, including those we all

still know and cherish within ourselves, would we be prepared to pay that price? If we ask God to act on special occasions, do we really suppose that he could do that simply when we want him to, and then back off again for the rest of the time?”²

Perhaps, after all, it’s better that God should give the universe, and each of us, the freedom to act as we choose, even if that means that evil things can take place. The parable reassures us that there will be a harvest-time, when the good and the bad will be sorted out, but in the meantime we will have to be patient. Just as there is a good reason in the parable why the weeds and the wheat are allowed to grow together, so God has his own good reasons for allowing evil to continue for a season. Good and evil are so entangled together in the way the world works that God in his wisdom clearly believes now is not the best time to sort everything out. We need to put our trust in God’s wisdom and his love, in the confidence that one day all will come right.

Conclusion

We can all be tempted to look for simple and straightforward explanations of how the world works, or think that people can simply be categorized as “good” or “evil”.

Jesus does not deny that there is a distinction between good and evil, and he certainly isn’t saying that God doesn’t really care about the evil in the world.

² Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone Part 1* (London: SPCK 2002), p168

But what he *is* saying is that the world is in too tangled a mess for a simple quick-fix solution like plucking up all the evildoers. It's a mistake to put people into simple categories of good and bad. We all have both good and bad qualities, and one day, at the last judgement, it will be clear who belongs to God and who doesn't. In the meantime, we need to be patient and trust God to work out his good purposes in his own good time. But rest assured, God's kingdom is growing and there will be a harvest!