

The Wheat and the Weeds

Matthew chapter 13 verses 24-30

Judge Not

It seems that Jesus had constantly to warn against over enthusiasm of one kind or another. In this parable Jesus warns against the over-enthusiastic efforts of those who wanted to weed out the 'baddies' from amongst his followers.

It was directed mainly at his opponents among the Pharisees. They were never slow to point out that many of Jesus' closest associates were people of doubtful morals and dubious character. Did not the Law (given by God himself) expressly state that such people were beyond the pale and that "good" people should keep their distance? There was no place in the Kingdom for notorious sinners. They should be weeded out rather than welcomed.

Even Jesus' disciples were a bit confused and wondered whether he ought to be a bit more discriminating about the kind of people he welcomed into his fellowship.

So Jesus tells a story. A man sowed good seed in his land but, when it sprouted, a poisonous weed called a "darnel" was seen to be growing alongside the wheat. His farm labourers were all for uprooting the weed but the farmer curbed their enthusiasm. In the earliest stages of growth the weed was virtually indistinguishable from the wheat. Uprooting the darnel might mean uprooting half the wheat at the same time. So we come to the punch-line of the parable. "Let both grow together until the harvest". Only then will the difference become apparent and separation possible.

It is a warning against premature and hasty judgement. And it is just as relevant today. Some would like membership of the Church to be confined to the "good guys" and for the Church to become a closed community. Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God ought to reflect a mixed community. We ought not to be over-eager to judge and condemn and ex-communicate. That might be a bit unsettling but there are good reasons for it.

The first is that nobody is all good or all bad. We are, all of us, an admixture of good and bad. Our lives, like the farmer's field, contain both wheat and weeds. Years ago the Moral Rearmament movement was in vogue and it had its own catchphrases and ditties. One song went;

"when you point a finger at your neighbour
there are three more pointing back at you".

Which is true. And we ought also to remember the word of Jesus spoken to those who brought before him a woman caught in the act of adultery. The Law required that she should be stoned to death. Jesus said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone". The fact is that, since we are already compromised, we are in no position to make ultimate judgements or engage in a wholesale weeding out process.

Secondly, we do not have enough information to make these kind of judgements. We might cry 'hypocrite' when a Church member comes short, but we might also ask what sort of a person he would be if he didn't come to Church! And who knows what were the pressures and influences and temptations which brought him up short?

Robbie Burns, the Scots poet, once said;

"what's done we partly may compute,
we know not what's resisted".

It is very easy to make sweeping judgements based purely on what we see and to engage in clean-out operations based on external evidence only. It is easy to condemn without knowing the full

facts, and, given the complexity of human nature, the full facts are hard to come by.

Thirdly (and this does not emerge out of the parable!) we should “let both grow together” because what we are now is not necessarily what we will be in future. Human nature, unlike weeds, can change. To write people off and cast them out on the basis of what they are now precludes any possibility that they might change for the better tomorrow. And the Gospel (Good News) is all about changing human nature. As Christians and as a Church we should be more concerned about facilitating moral and spiritual growth than weeding out those who at present fall short.

Weeds do not have the potential to become wheat. But sinners do have the potential to become saints and we ought not to weed them out prematurely.

All of which does not mean we should tolerate intentional and deliberate and persistent wrongdoing. And, if people are blatant in their bad behaviour, then we ought to make it clear that such behaviour is unacceptable. Jesus did not condemn the woman caught in adultery, but he did say to her “Go and sin no more”.

“Let both grow together” said Jesus. Then added, “until the harvest”. Jesus never pretended that there would be no final judgement. He spoke of it often enough. But that judgement will be made by God who alone knows the full facts. The nature of that judgement is a matter of debate and some would say that it is not God who judges us but we who judge ourselves. We find ourselves confronted by an ultimate Truth and Goodness (personalised in ‘God’) and are forced to recognise and accept that we have fallen far short. That too, is a judgement. It is no less final and no less condemnatory and no less real.

Meanwhile we ought to refrain from making ultimate judgements about the character and destiny of others. And we ought not to engage in a wholesale weeding out process on the basis of those judgements.

“Let both grow together until the harvest”