

SFX 2023

16A The Weeds in the Wheat

When St Matthew writes his Gospel, and collects together the sayings and stories of Jesus, he seems to really warm up when he comes to any parable about Judgment. He seems happy to stoke the flames of the burning furnace, and six times he records the expression 'weeping and grinding of teeth', an effective phrase that stirs the imagination, obviously the intended effect.

A lady came to see me a little while back, not of this parish, and as she sat before me she started to shed a few tears. She told me that a fear of hell had taken hold of her, of how it had made her obsessively scrupulous, with such thoughts that she might not have made a good confession, in the right form and the right way, such that God might not forgive her. As a child, she said she had experienced a few fire and brimstone sermons, using all the imagery that St Matthew provides. She cried. And I could have cried with her, because this was obviously a very good woman, a very ordinary Catholic, overtaken by an irrational fear.

I asked her what she really thought God is like. Did she really believe that "*God is love,*" as St John tells us? And what does that mean? Could she say with St Paul, "*the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me?*" Was that just so my peccadilloes, my stubborn, stupid and selfish sins could stand in the way of his purpose? "*Who will separate us from the love of Christ?*" asks St Paul. Are my sins stronger than his salvation? Is my "No" stronger than God's "Yes," Did the Son of God go through all that, because I missed my morning prayers on three occasions? Or I got mad, or sad. Of course, she knew this in her head, but it is another thing to know something deep in our hearts.

We can all be fearful at times, we want clarity, like the disciples today asking for an explanation of the parable. Of all the Gospel writers, St Matthew seems to want things clear-cut, and that can be a little frightening. Perhaps it was comforting for his congregation to hear that all the evil of the world would be burnt away and virtuous would shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father. Like the disciples today, his little flock on the inside, on the stairway to heaven. So he seems happy to divide the world into sheep and goats, wise and foolish virgins, weeds and wheat, wicked or faithful, cursed or blessed.

I don't know about you, but I don't experience the world like that, as if there are only two kinds of people weeds or wheat. Such black and white clarity escapes most of us when we have just a smidgen of self-knowledge. There are certainly both weeds and wheat at the bottom of my garden, and just as the parable indicates, it is the nature of dandelion that they have grown so long together that you can't always tell it apart. What might seem like a good deed might come from selfish motivations, and a wicked act might be a genuine mistake. Are you doing something because you are kind, or because you like it?

Of course, in some rare individuals we can recognize great holiness and in others there a palpable evil. And there is judgment, there has to be to have any coherence to the notion of God's love and justice. But I don't believe for a moment that God is lining up Aunt

Sally for heaven and Uncle Jo for hell. It would seem to contradict the essence of the Bible, the whole story of salvation and the whole purpose of Christ.

I can understand why that lady was disturbed by some of the rhetorical flourishes so loved by St Matthew. But I don't really think that these parables of 'weeping and grinding of teeth' are about judgment day. Or rather it is our Lord's way of shocking us to bring that judgment into our lives here and now.

The story of the Sheep and the Goats isn't really about the ultimate fate of goats. It is stirring me to ask whether mercy and compassion are at work in me now.

The parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, isn't really about the ultimate destination of darnel. Rather it is about God and about me.

It says God is patient and so should we. It goes to the heart of one of the greatest temptations amongst religious people: the impulse to sort the good people from the bad, the saints from the sinners, the church from the world. It is about not rushing to judgment. It is about being patient with people.

Don't get into the weeding business. Weeds are no good, but weeding? Weeding is worse. Leave it to the angels. However bad people are, it is worse to make premature judgements to try to purify the community by rooting out the bad.

We can think how puritans throughout the ages have gone in with their religious zeal and suppressed much that is good in the zeal of rooting out evil. Like social media today that piles in to condemn. God is not inclined to do so. Nor should the church seek to rid itself of those who don't measure up. It is not a club for saints but is a hospital for sinners. "There but for the grace of God go I" is something we should all be in the habit of saying. To act too early, condemn, purge, or excommunicate is to make the Church judgmental and authoritarian in nature. It is to follow the world, not to follow Christ.

So, don't let out your inner Puritan. We should keep an eye on our own behaviour but not rush to judgment of others. How often have we done that and later regretted it? How often have we wished we were a bit more patient with people? Can we have the patience of the farmer, who sows and sows and sows - in faith, hope and trust.

At the end of the parable all the evil is sifted away, all that provokes offence, and the good people of God are left in the field shining in the sun. Taken as a whole the Scriptures envisage only the universal triumph of Christ, which hardly leaves room for failure. His love and his will shall reach its purpose when his faithful people, redeemed by his blood, shine in the Kingdom of the Father. His love will be complete, his purpose accomplished *when he brings us all together to everlasting life* (RB73). Why then should we live in fear or forget that we have a good God?