

17<sup>th</sup> July 2011. Trinity 4. Romans 8:12-25. Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43.

During the last fortnight, I've been dog-sitting for my daughter and as a result I've been taking her dog Ruby for a long walk each day. One of our favourite walks has been through the farmers fields at the back of my house, across and past Foal Farm. It's quite noticeable that the fields of wheat are ripening very early and this has been because we've had two very dry and hot months in April and May and the rain which has finally come in June and July has probably been too little too late. As a result, the farmers are now saying that their wheat harvest is going to produce a greatly reduced yield. Well, as I've been looking at the wheat fields and contemplating Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares, as usual there are indeed weeds growing amongst the wheat in those fields. But here in England, they are weeds which don't cause the farmer any real problems, thistles, poppies, chick-weed and that nasty yellow stuff poisonous to horses, ragwort! When the British farmer harvests his wheat, the modern combined harvester will automatically thresh the ears and stalks, and only grains of wheat will shoot into the harvesters panniers. But this was not so with the wheat-fields of Palestine in our Lord's day. As with so many of His parables, this teaching is taken from real life as it was in His day. Sure, there were weeds of all kinds, but these particular weeds to which He refers were of a very special and particularly nasty kind. They were called bearded darnel, a weed which was indistinguishable from the wheat as it grew up, and even in full maturity the heads resembled those on the wheat-stems. There were only three differences between the darnel and the wheat. The darnel did not grow as high as the wheat, and when harvested, the grains of darnel were grey in colour and also the darnel was semi-poisonous. And there were only three ways to deal with this nasty weed. You didn't try to pull it up after it had started growing because its roots were often intertwined with the wheat and so you were likely to pull up the healthy wheat-stems at the same time. And so some farmers would reap the fields of wheat at a height above the darnel and then having completed the harvesting of a field would set it on fire to burn out the weeds. The second way of dealing with the darnel was somewhat laborious. As the reaping and gathering took place, the darnel had to be carefully separated into separate bundles and then later burnt. And the third way, also time-consuming and labour-intensive took place after threshing. This was to carefully pick out all the grey darnel seeds which were distinguishable from the golden wheat grains and then destroy them separately. So this gives you some idea of how real-life the details in Jesus' parable were. But what was the meaning behind it?

Well, it may seem obvious to us all, particularly as Jesus gave an explanation of it. But, as we'll see, the parable was not just aimed at those who were His obvious enemies but also some of those who were within His own circle. Jesus' ministry began with the calling of His close disciples and then the gathering of many other followers as time went on. Some of those He called were people whose manners and back-ground were somewhat shocking and surprising to those who later criticized His ministry. Firstly, there were uncouthed, uneducated fishermen like Peter and Andrew, James and John. Men casual, if not crudely ignorant in their observance of Jewish customs and its many fastidious rules and regulations. You may remember that in Matthews gospel 15, Jesus and His disciples were criticized for not always washing their hands before meals, as it was pointed out that the disciples of John the Baptist did. Jesus' wise observation and simple response to that was, "It is not what enters a man's mouth which defiles him, but what comes out!" And another example was, you may remember, criticisms of Him and them when they went through the cornfields and gathered ears of corn on the Sabbath because they were hungry. Jesus' response was, "Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." And then there was Matthew called Levi, whom He called. He was a tax-collector, hated, despised by most Jews, not just the very religious ones, but by the ordinary working people, the Jews of every class. He was a man working for the hated Romans and collecting and sometimes over-collecting taxes from them on their behalf. Jesus called Him to be a close disciple, one of the twelve. And Jesus also ministered to another tax-collector, Zacchaeus, and when He went to dine with him and his friends, was criticised for eating with tax-collectors and sinners. And then in the crowds who followed Him and with whom He often associated, there were those who were called "sinners", fallen women, and many who did not observe the Law. Jesus was heavily criticized for His involvement with all of these people. And not just by the Scribes and Pharisees, but sometimes by His own inner circle of disciples. "I have not come to call the righteous," He said, "but sinners to repent". That was Jesus' response. Jesus had told them that the Kingdom of God was at hand. But for them the Messianic dream of the Jews was a Kingdom not just free of Roman domination, but a Kingdom of righteousness, a moral and ethical Kingdom free of sin and free of injustice. Even amongst His own followers there were the voices of dissent, and so to some extent this parable was preached for them.

The parable says that the Kingdom of God is like a field of wheat. The sower of the wheat is the Son of God. The good wheat are the righteous.

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I like the words in the final verse in our gospel where it says, "The righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father." As I think I pointed out in my sermon 3 weeks ago, the word "righteous" is not what many of us would interpret it to mean - those who are right, good, sinless, upright etc. That may only be partially true. Many of us might point to someone who we think fulfils this description. But that is only what we think. None of us can see into another's heart or discern their real motivation in life or know their innermost thoughts and secrets. As I said previously, the word "righteous" means "to be in a right relationship with God". That must always be what we as aspiring Christian disciples should be continually aiming at and working for. And so the good wheat are those in a right relationship with God. They honour Him, they try to obey Him, they take up their cross each day and they try always to follow Christ and His teachings in every part of their lives.

But the parable says that an enemy came by night and sowed weeds among the wheat. Who then is this enemy? Do we really need to spell it out? Our Lord referred to him often - Satan, the devil, Beelzebub. There can be no doubt that there is this force for evil in our world today. We need only recall recent events in our history, the bombing and killing of many innocents in New York on 9/11 and in London on 7/7. And we only have to watch the headlines week by week, as we hear of yet another stabbing on our streets, or another child abuse case. Some may believe in a personal Devil, some may prefer to believe in a power for evil. But however you interpret this, you cannot possibly deny the presence of an overpowering force for evil in this world. Jesus refers to him as the enemy and his weapons as the seed of the devil. The interesting thing about the comparison of those who are the seed of the devil in this parable is that they seem to mimic the righteous. They appear to be good wheat, when in fact they are really the deadly darnel! Poisonous and destructive. "Do not remove the weeds until the harvest," says the owner in the parable. The owner of the field, Who is God, tells His servants (that is His followers) to let the weeds and the good wheat grow up together and when the harvest comes, those weeds will be gathered and destroyed, and the good wheat will be gathered into His barn. The parable is telling us that it is not for us to judge others. It is not for us to point the finger and say that he or she is the good wheat and he or she is one of the weeds. WE may think that someone is unworthy to be called good or righteous, but it is simply not for us to make that judgement. It is only for God to judge them, and we must always remember that God withholds His judgement until the end of time, allowing repentance and knowledge and

understanding to develop - in other words God gives time for our repentance, for all to turn back from evil and choose the path to God. God does not judge whilst the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Jesus directed His followers to "Go and preach the gospel to the ends of the earth and to make disciples of all the nations." Ultimately, people will actually judge themselves either by accepting this gospel message and the Lordship of Christ in their lives or by rejecting the gospel and He Who is the message of the gospel. And so, "Judgement is mine says the Lord".

And finally, there could be a slightly different and more personal interpretation of this parable. It would seem that the primary meaning of the parable speaks of the wheat-fields as if they were the world into which the good seed, the gospel news is sown. But the field itself could also be designated YOUR field or MY field, our own individual, personal spiritual life. We all like to think, don't we, that our faith in Christ is so strong and that nothing can ever shake it. But during times of upheaval in our lives, and inevitably they will come, the enemy will try to slip into your field and sow his weeds. Those weeds could be anything, from divorce, to redundancy, the death of our loved one, ill-health, abuse or abandonment, or debts and worries which cause sleeplessness and fear and destroy our feelings of security. These nasty weeds are the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, and the enemy will try to undermine our spirits this way. These deadly arrows will often hurt us deeply and sometimes try to undermine or destroy our faith in God. We may even ask ourselves the question, "Why has God allowed this to happen to me?" And if we're not careful we are left hurting, full of terrible self-doubt and unable to recover, full of resentment and anger. But that question only needs to be put to God Himself. "My God, why have You allowed this to happen to me?" (An echo of those words from the cross?) God is faithful and will always answer the prayer from the heart. He will answer it in His way and in His good time. But He WILL answer it. It is He Who will carry us through our crisis, but we need always first to place all our problems and all our hurts into His strong Hands and trust in His unfailing love. If we ask Him, God will always give us the power to start again. This isn't just true of repentance for failures or for sin, it's true for anything which threatens to destroy our joy or our happiness in life. In Isaiah 43, God speaks through His prophet His words of assurance, "Remember not the former things, .....for behold I will do a new thing." God doesn't just tell us this, He also enables us to do it! He says we CAN start again. God's Spirit will enable us to nurse and to heal our damaged souls and our hurting memories if we will continue to trust in His good purposes for us and for

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our lives. If we do, then He will help us overcome the enemy. The first Epistle of John chapter 4verse4 gives us reason to believe this, for he says this of the enemy whom he calls the antichrist. He says "You are of God, little children, and have overcome, because He Who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." Amen.