

17 July 2011

Matthew 13:23-30. 36-43

How do you deal with weeds?

There are those who take the “nuke it” approach – applying potent weedkiller. But weed killers can kill other things as well, and unless they are used very carefully, there is a risk that attacking the weeds will also damage the plants growing alongside them, reducing the harvest, and what about longer term effects on the soil?

For the gardeners among you, and any ex-farmers – I wonder what you think of Jesus' recommended course of action in the face of an infestation of weeds? I know, from personal experience, that just leaving weeds to grow can mean a takeover of everything else in the garden – that's because I'm not very good at getting around to weeding, and hence there are plenty of weeds in my garden.

Last week Jesus had a story about a sower who went to sow, and today we have another, hard at work, who sowed good seed – maybe it produced some 100 fold, some 60, some 30.

But as the crop grows, the farm workers realise that something else is also growing in the field – there in the midst of the productive field, weeds are growing. They are distressed and concerned – how could this have happened? And what should they do about it?

These weeds are particularly vicious. Jesus is talking about bearded darnell, a pernicious weed which looks identical to wheat as it grows, until it produces seed heads. But by then its roots surround the roots of whatever other plants are growing nearby, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water, and making it impossible to root out the weeds without damaging the good crop. The darnell grain itself is somewhat poisonous, causing dizziness and sickness, with a slightly narcotic effect. When ground, into flour it has a bitter, unpleasant taste. If it isn't separated from the wheat before grinding, even a small amount of darnell can make the resulting flour inedible.

When the workers in Jesus' parable find weeds growing in the wheat field, they are dismayed and perplexed. They know that they sowed good seed – so how come this field has become contaminated with bad seed? The farmer recognises immediately what has happened – an enemy has been at work. The workers are ready to be pro-active, to deal with this calamity right away. They will get in there and get rid of the weeds immediately.

What a shock when the farmer says “No, let them both grow together until harvest time. If you pull up the weeds, you will probably end up rooting up the wheat as well and destroying the crop. When it is time for the harvest, when the weeds can be identified by the grain they produce, that's the time to separate them.”

The kingdom of heaven is like this? Like what? Like a crop that, once planted, grows until the harvest. The seed does its thing. It's good seed – it grows well – there is no question that it will produce a good harvest. Even the presence of the weeds doesn't seem to inhibit the growing seed - “let them both grow together” the farmer says, “until the harvest”. In fact he sees that the greatest danger to the growing crop is from the actions of the farm workers who want to tear out the weeds immediately. That will certainly interrupt the growing process, uprooting the plants growing from good seed, and destroying much of the harvest. Later, at harvest time, that will be the time to deal with the weeds. They won't have produced wheat to be gathered in – but they will be gathered up and used as fuel for the fire – which does in fact put them to some good use in a land without a lot of fuel for burning.

But right now, during the growing season, the greatest threat to the crop actually comes from acting too hastily, from over-reacting to the presence of the weeds. It is too soon to be able to distinguish between what is wheat and what is weed.

Don't we often think “Why doesn't God DO something?” Why does evil flourish, and God does nothing? And shouldn't we help God out, by going on a crusade against whichever social evil is plaguing our city, by laying down the rules for proper and appropriate behaviour, by straightening people out? What are we waiting for?

We find waiting so very difficult – and yet these parables of the kingdom describe a process, sowing and germinating and growing until the harvest, which takes time. We want to see results, action, and we want it NOW

But Jesus' parables suggest that God's kingdom comes not with a big spectacular bang, but rather more like the slow growth of a fruitful plant, unnoticeable from moment to moment, but over time developing and flourishing and producing the harvest for which it was planted.

And the good seed keeps growing, in Jesus' story. There is no question in this story about its fruitfulness. But there *are* weeds growing alongside.

“Let them grow together” says the farmer, “until the harvest”. Let/allow/permit them to grow – that's how the Greek is translated here. But the same word is as often translated “forgive” - it's used in the Lord's Prayer – “forgive us our sins (or our debts) as we forgive those who sin against us”. And it's the word Jesus spoke from the cross - “Father forgive them”.

Forgiveness is God's plan for dealing with the weeds growing among the wheat. Not rooting out by force. Using force against these enemy weeds will most often accomplish the work of the enemy, impeding the growth of the crop, delaying the harvest. How often have people been turned away from God because of the way that they have been treated by someone who claims to speak for God?

In Jesus God pronounced judgment on evil, but judgment was declared from the cross. “Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing”

This doesn't sit easily, does it? Is such passivity an adequate response to the evil we see around us, and within us? Surely we have a moral obligation to fight against evil?

But Jesus warned us “those who live by the sword will die by the sword” - not a threat so much as an observation, a description of the evil effect violence has on those who use it.

Look at the way Jesus lived his life – he was accused of spending rather too much time with the weeds, the outcasts in his society, with those whom respectable religious people most often avoided.

He refused to use force or violence even against those who opposed him, who arrested him and tortured him and crucified him.

And this Jesus, who on earth forgave sins freely, who was betrayed, deserted, and denied by those in whom he had sown the seeds of the kingdom, who suffered at the hands of enemies – he is the one who will at the end of the age send his angels to gather in the harvest, and then will deal with the weeds that had grown together with the wheat.

Judgment is in his hands – hands pierced by nails, hand held out in welcome and blessing and forgiveness. Judgment is in his hands, not ours.

We are called to wait and trust in the judgment of the one who is God's promise of grace to us, and for now, to live the growing, flourishing life of the kingdom, growing alongside the weeds, producing the fruit of the Spirit, and continuing to sow the seed of the gospel.