

Sermon: Beware the weeds in the church garden

Reading: Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

Introduction.

Anyone who has a garden will know how hard it is to keep the weeds out of the flower bed. Weeds seem to have an uncanny knack of, not only surviving but frustratingly, thriving in very places we would prefer them not to be! No matter how careful, how fastidious, how vigilant we try to be, the weeds seem to be in a plot designed to work against the plans of the gardener!

In our reading today Jesus is teaching again using parables, this time He uses a farming illustration. He speaks about an enemy who has sown bad seed in the field sown with good seed. When Jesus speaks in parables the obvious message in the illustration is not the one to focus on! We are to look for the message Jesus is laying alongside the illustration, the message hidden from the casual hearer. This is the message we are to look out for. Remember Jesus says, 'If you have ears to listen then hear'. Matthew helpfully records the meaning for us. So what is the message hidden in today's parable? And what are the implications for us as believers and as a church?

Weeds in the flower bed

The farmer sowing the good seed in the field refers to Jesus the sower of the word and the true seed are the people of the kingdom. The field is the world. Sometime in the night an enemy (Satan) comes and sows bad seed alongside the true seed. This goes unnoticed until the plants begin to grow. It is only once the plants have begun to sprout the problem is revealed. The owners servants asked the sower if they should pull up the weeds to protect the crop? The reply was no, for as you uproot the weeds you will also uproot the wheat, let them both grow together until the harvest.

So what or who are the bad seed? The bad seed sown amongst the true seeds are the people of the evil one. The question I found myself asking was, do the bad seed know they are bad seed? Can bad seed be mistaken into thinking they are good and therefore do not realise they are not working for the purposes of God but actually working against God and His divine purposes? This is truly a puzzling question and to answer it will need discernment and help of the Holy Spirit and for us to be honest as we reflect on our walk as followers of Jesus and members of His Church?

Not me! Not in our church

The most gracious amongst us by now may be feeling a little defensive saying, 'I don't know of any weeds in the church I attend, (when it was open). I know everyone and they are all lovely people, there are no weeds amongst us!' This thought is most gracious, but the question needs further reflection to explore further rather than being defensive. If Jesus in this parable is warning us that the church (kingdom) will be a mixture of good and bad growing together then we at least must examine ourselves and the church so we can identify the true from the false, this is such an important task and wisdom and discernment is required if much damage is to be prevented in the short term and long term, let me explain.

Remember when Jesus was asked by a rich, young, man what must he do to inherit eternal life? This encounter is recorded in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. This young man, was wealthy, powerful and in his own eyes a good person. His approach to Jesus with his question sounds earnest and his replies to Jesus questions seem very

sincere. If this young man had approached us in church requesting membership, we may think he would be an ideal candidate. He sounds sincere, he is young which is a bonus, rich, powerful and influential, why not make him a member!

Jesus however teaches us by example, we should not simply accept people into membership because of an inclusion policy and certainly not based on their outward appearances, without at least checking out their heart. Jesus asks this young man a couple of simple questions. At first the young man sounds righteous in his behaviour and attitude, however Jesus' questions soon reveal his heart and where his true love lay! His love is not for God but in his wealth. It's a sad set of events, Jesus loves him, but this young man walks away sad. Jesus explains how hard it will be for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God because their heart is first of all for their wealth. You cannot serve two masters! This ideal candidate in the church membership would eventually cause problems, especially if his heart is not focussed on God's will and purposes. Once this person had rooted in the church, there will be no fruit, only a weed growing alongside the true vines. Imagine the disagreements on the church council when it comes to mission focus, spending money and what are the churches priorities!

Now I can hear some of you thinking, how can I possibly know that? I don't, but Jesus did because he let him walk away.

Why weeds?

Some say a weed is only a plant in the wrong place! We can see why Jesus chose to speak about weeds as it is apt to describe those people who are in the wrong place, spiritually.

In horticultural terms a weed is a wild plant (unruly), growing where it is not wanted, because it grows in competition with the cultivated plants. A weed has no value in the flower bed, where it only cares for its own survival and growth and its desire to spread itself further. If left unchecked it will grow vigorously, taking up the nutrients from the others around it. Once fully grown this weed will eventually overshadow the cultivated plants and block out the light or choke out the life of the cultivated plants. If this rich, young ruler had been allowed to root in the church while his heart was not for serving God and focussing on God's will and purpose, he possibly could mislead the church in his own self interests and not that of Jesus', ultimately this would be toxic, destructive and a hindrance to God's mission, even though he would probably still be seen by many as a very nice person, but a wolf in sheep clothing none the less, for he would not have God's affairs in mind but his own.

How shocked and saddened this young man was to discover his heart was exposed as a weed! Jeremiah the prophet says of the heart, 'The heart is deceitful above all things' (**Jer 17:9**). This young man had deceived himself thinking he was a good person but was blinded to his own heart. How shocked we are when the Scriptures hold up a mirror to us and we see our true reflection smiling back at us. The aim of the Scripture is to see a reflection of Jesus smiling back at us, not ourselves!

Sown deliberately

Jesus says in the parable of the weeds, the bad seed was sown deliberately by an enemy. This doesn't sound shocking while we still have a field in our mind, but when we transpose the field illustration from the world to the church it becomes quite shocking to hear. But why should this surprise or even shock us? If the people of the evil one are sown in the world who are bringing about chaos and calamity by doing the devil's bidding, surely the church is a prime target for the devil, to ensure his seed are sown amongst God's people, why? The answer is obvious what better way to discredit the church than to encourage

diversion, distractions, deviation and ultimately destructive practices to make the church dysfunctional.

If you are not convinced then think over the scandals the church has had to deal with over the last decade or so. Safeguarding policies and training are mandatory, DBS checks are high priority in all the churches to ensure we can create safer places for worship and community. How much effort, time, finances and other resources have been diverted from mission because the weeds have been in the garden? Safeguarding is just one policy, consider the long list of other policies which are meant to keep check and eradicate bad behaviour in our churches, which range from, sexual harassment, bullying, discrimination etc! We have just as many policies within the church to govern right behaviour as the secular world does! This is a sad state of affairs, and discouraged. But be of good cheer Jesus said we should expect it! When asked if the weeds should be pulled up, Jesus tells the servants to leave them to grow together until the time of separation at harvest. Now please don't misunderstand, this is not to say we leave bad behaviour unchallenged, hence the need for the policies. We are to be wise as serpents but gentle as doves.

Problems in the early church!

There has always been weeds in the church from the very beginning. As we discover when we read the letters addressed to the early churches. Paul must have had many a sleepless night praying for the churches in his care. He wrote and warns them to be vigilant against the weeds that have found their way into the church and were already growing unruly and causing problems.

Consider the church in Corinth, we have two letters from Paul to the Corinthian Christians. Paul discovers there is discord amongst them. There are some who are dishonouring the Sacraments of the Lord's table! His own authority and leadership is being challenged. This is not new, remember Moses was also challenged in the days of Korah's rebellion (**Numbers 26:9**). What does shock us is when we read the letter to the church in Corinth and discover there is sexual immorality among the membership which many in the church are condoning and even celebrating as a good thing!

How about the church in Ephesus? Here we discover the weeds have grown so powerful they are even named for all eternity, Hymaneus, Alexander and Philetus. These unholy three were teachers within the church and their teachings which have spread like gangrene which can only be dealt with by removal (**see 1 Tim 1:20 and 2 Tim 2:17**). Paul says of Hymenaeus and Alexander that he has handed them over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme. Paul was not afraid to grasp the nettle and pull it out. Some may think, this sounds harsh and unloving, but when eternal souls are at stake the flock needs to be protected and strong leadership is needed.

How about the Christians in Galatia? These churches were sailing so close to the edge of heresy. They were turning to a different gospel and adopting false doctrines of faith. This was becoming so serious an issue they were in serious danger of no longer being accepted as the Church of Jesus Christ. Paul challenges them asking, 'Who has bewitched you with a different gospel?' He condemns even the angels if they ever dare to preach a different gospel than that of Christ. Paul's words are strong and direct and make you wince a bit when you read Galatians 5:12. Paul takes the gospel, sound teaching and the doctrines of faith very seriously, as each of us should today. For we are just as vulnerable to false teaching and wrong leadership today as in the days of Paul. Christians in Colossi were also in error theologically, again due to poor teachings and calls the error of what the church was following as a philosophy of empty deceit.

Jesus handpicked the 12 and yet says of his 12 that one of them is a devil (**John 6:70**). Judas not only stole from the common purse, scolded Mary for wasting the expensive oil which she used to anoint Jesus but also betrayed his friend with a kiss for 30 pieces of silver. What is interesting about Judas was, no one suspected him! When Jesus spoke of being betrayed all of them were questioning themselves, saying, 'Is it I Lord?' and yet no one noticed the one Jesus was referring to had already left, no one suspected Judas at all, right up to the point of the betrayers kiss.

So far I have identified the false believers and hypocrites from Paul's letters who have rooted within the churches, who were changing the gospel to another gospel, altering the doctrines of faith and promoting humanistic philosophies which are empty and deceitful. Now I want to focus on the weeds we may have going in our own hearts. Remember it was in the dark, while everyone slept when the bad seeds were sown, unseen, unhindered and unnoticed until they had taken root. These seeds are small and begin small, like niggles, frustrations, hurts etc. If we allow these to grow we are in trouble.

We must check our own hearts to ensure we are not cultivating weeds of bitterness, anger, jealousy, envy, pride etc. Our hearts when well cultivated can become targets for weeds of destructive behaviour. Consider the two godly women Syntchye and Euodia who were bickering and quarrelling with each other. Paul pleads with these two women to quit their bickering and become of one heart and be of the same mind (**Phil 4:2**). We must be on guard not to let our own selfish desires, ambitions, or disagreements take a hold in our hearts with Jesus Church.

It's so easy to get it wrong in our humanness. Peter a man who was so committed to Jesus having declared Jesus as the Christ the Messiah and yet just afterwards as Jesus was speaking about what must happen to him, Peter takes Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, 'Never Lord!' he said, "This shall never happen to you!" Peter thought he was protecting his friend, his Lord but didn't realise while he thought he was doing the right thing, he was actually doing the devils work! For Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns" (**Matthew 16:22-23**). Jesus goes on to tell the disciples, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it' (**Matthew 16:24**). Each of us must not only be vigilant within the church in order to avoid being deceived and misled with false and popular doctrines of the age but we need also to learn how to discern our own heart and motivations for the decision we make concerning the church. For we may think we are doing the right thing but our motivation in may be misguided, good teaching and sound doctrines are essential for any church in any age. Wisdom and discernment two gifts each of us should be praying for.

Summary

Weeds can look beautiful and flower wonderfully, but you don't want them in your rose bed or borders! Good and bad will indeed continually grow together right up until the Day of the Lord, when Jesus will send out his angels into the world for the great gathering of His harvest, when the separation will begin. Then the weeds will be uprooted and cast into the fiery furnaces. In the mean time we should not be surprised when weeds are discovered in the 'house of God' but as Christians we must learn to be discerning and learn how to read the Scriptures for ourselves, then we will be more equipped to discern between truth and error. The spiritual health of our churches are more at risk today from false doctrines than a virus. Let us be seed that grows true in the image of the one who plants us and may we produce good fruits resulting in a great harvest for the kingdom, in Jesus name. **Amen.**