

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 35”
Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

When I was at school the Deputy Headmaster, a Mr Cooksey, was one of our Latin teachers. He was one of that generation of slightly eccentric teachers who had been an officer during the Second War and then gone straight into teaching on some kind of ex-servicemen’s teacher training scheme. He would literally beat our verb conjugations and adjective declensions into us by banging the boys on the front row over the heads with his battered copy of *North & Hillard* as we recited the various bits of grammar. We read Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* with him and I remember him saying on one occasion about a particular passage in that book (and Julius Caesar wasn’t a great literary stylist, it has to be said), “If I had been marking this page, I would have put a red line right through it.”

Well, we get to another of Jesus’ parables this morning and it seems that, just like Julius Caesar and his grasp of Latin prose style, Jesus seems to have forgotten what scholars have said about parables. We said a couple of weeks ago that Jesus doesn’t explain his parables – and here he does. We said that parables teach just one point (which, to be fair, this one does) but we shouldn’t look to tie up every detail with some kind of other meaning. And what does Jesus do here? He goes through the parable and invests every little aspect of it with some deeper meaning. Of course, that is very helpful for us – and for the first disciples who, once again, don’t seem to have a clue what he’s on about – but it is rather unusual. With the exception of the Parable of the Soils, or the Sower, which we looked at a couple of weeks ago, Jesus allows the stories he uses to speak for themselves without feeling he has to unpack them for an audience that is often a bit slow on the uptake.

And another thing about this parable that is repeated in a great many others is the way it begins: “*The kingdom of heaven is like ...*” If you’ve got your Bible open at this passage, you’ll see that in chapter 13 there are seven parables and six of them start with that little introduction – and there are others in this Gospel that start the same way. Jesus, as we’ve been seeing over the past weeks and months as we’ve made our way through this account that Matthew gives us of his life and teaching, has arrived on the scene as the Kingly Messiah, the person appointed and anointed by God to set to rights the many wrongs and injustices in a world deeply infected with evil. This Kingly Messiah was promised to his people by God and predicted by the proclamations of the Hebrew prophets, poets and preachers. As they directed the gaze of God’s people towards the future, they revealed a vision of what life would be like when this Messiah arrived to inaugurate the Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of Heaven, as Matthew calls it, being a good Jew who cannot utter the name of God). Injustices would be put right, evil would be overcome, illness and disease would be banished, relationships would be restored and peace would reign.

So here is Jesus, who has made it very clear that he is the one to usher in this promised sovereign rule of God, this longed for Kingdom – and he has, indeed, offered the people in the area around Galilee all kinds of glimpses of this Kingdom as he has healed the sick, restored the dignity of the disadvantaged, argued with the religious and political leader who have tried to maintain the status quo. But, the people might have been entitled to ask, where is the fullness of this Kingdom? It’s all very well sorting out the odd leper and restoring sight to a few blind people: it’s all very well beating the Pharisees in debates about the Law of Moses; it’s all very well speaking wise words about how to live life to the full – but there still seem to be a lot of Roman soldiers throwing their weight around, there’s still an awful gap between the rich and powerful and the poor and disenfranchised, there’s still a fair bit of crime going on, and there’s still a heck of a lot of sick people wanting help and a lot of disabled beggars sitting on the street corners. Where’s this Kingdom, then? When’s everything going to turn out the way we’ve been led to believe?

And, no doubt, people still ask such questions today. Probably a fair few of you here this morning have given that a bit of thought. And we’ve got the crucifixion and resurrection, and a great deal more New Testament writings and a couple of millennia of theological musings to throw into the mix as well. If Jesus is who he said he was, if he had truly come to set up this Kingdom of peace and justice and joy, what’s gone wrong? Why are we still praying for Syria? Why are people still abusing children? Why are our hospitals bursting at the seams with people who are clearly not as fit and healthy as they ought to

be? Why are there super-rich people swanning about thumbing their noses at the rule of law and millions of others who are having to use foodbanks and submit themselves to a welfare system that is clearly not fit for purpose?

“OK,” says Jesus, “Let me tell you a bit more about this Kingdom. The Kingdom at the moment is a bit like a farmer who sowed some seed ...” And off he goes into this story which, as we said a couple of weeks ago, is based on clearly observable stuff with which Jesus’ listeners would have been very familiar. These people who were listening to Jesus were people who lived in an agrarian economy, who depended on the land and who would immediately recognise a story about someone sowing his seed. His fields are planted with wheat and the green shoots have started to push up through the ground.

But one night, someone who has a grudge against this farmer gets into the fields and sows a lot of weeds as well. If you’ve ever had anything to do with horticultural shows, you’ll be aware of the intense rivalry that exists when it comes to the size of your leeks or the shape of your onions. Grown men have been known to spend the night armed on their allotments to prevent their rival leek-growers sabotaging their chances of carrying off the Arthur Clutterbuck Trophy and a cheque for £50 at next week’s show in the village hall. The rivalry that lay behind this act of sabotage was far greater than this, because such an action could ruin the man who’d planted the wheat. The farmer’s labourers spot the weeds coming up through the ground amongst the wheat and go to tell their boss.

Now, there were always going to be weeds amongst the corn. Seeds would have been blown on the wind or dropped by birds and there would usually be a fair scattering. But these weeds were put there on purpose by a rival – maybe someone who’d been wronged by the farmer, sacked, outmanoeuvred in a deal, beaten to a land sale or something like that – and so they would have been thickly sown. The Greek word for “weed” here is “zizania”. The French have a word “zizanie” which means someone who causes havoc and that’s what the weeds would have done. People who know about these things all say that the weeds would have been darnel, something that looks very much like wheat until it’s almost fully mature – and probably very difficult to distinguish from the wheat as the two things were growing together in the field. But what was even more annoying was that the roots of the darnel would have got completely tangled in with the roots of the wheat under the surface, so if you started to pull up the weeds – even if you were skilful enough to be able to distinguish them from the wheat – you’d almost certainly end up pulling up all the wheat as well.

So the boss tells his labourers to leave them all growing together. It’s not worth risking damage to the main crop at this stage. He says they are to wait until the harvest when the weeds will finally be easy to spot and when they will be cutting it all down with sickles, rather than pulling it up by the roots. Then the weeds can be sifted out from the wheat much more easily, tied up into bundles and, in an area where wood was pretty scarce, they could be used as fuel for their fires. There you are, that’s what this Kingdom is like, says Jesus – and goes on to tell another story (which we’ll look at in a couple of weeks’ time).

But the disciples are intrigued by this. How can this be like the Kingdom? What does Jesus mean by all this? So they wait until there’s just the little group of them and ask Jesus to explain it all (v36). And Jesus gives them a very clear explanation. The Son of Man – that’s him. He’s borrowing a phrase from the book of *Daniel* in the Old Testament to refer to himself, a phrase which would have had rich resonances with his Jewish listeners. And the Son of Man is at work in the world, represented by the field. This is quite definitely not a story about the Church, as some have tried to suggest. Jesus explicitly says, “*The field is the world*”. And in this world there are good people, people who are prepared to follow him and to allow God to shape their lives – and there are people who are “*sons of the evil one*”, those on whose lives the influence of the devil seems to be stronger than the influence of Jesus.

Jesus has come announcing and inaugurating this Kingdom, but the world is still full of people who are doing wrong. There are those who want to do good, who want the Kingdom to be fully accomplished. And there are those who are unfortunately living in ways that are quite inimical to the growth and spread

of that Kingdom. The great American preacher George Buttrick preached on this parable and entitled it "*The Perplexing Presence of Evil*". And it can be very perplexing, can't it? If Jesus came and did everything the Gospel writers tell us, if he won that victory on the cross and over the grave, if God wants the world to be restored to the way he originally intended, why is there so much wrong with the world still? How can you call this the Kingdom?

Well, just like that darnel that was scattered in the wheat field and was so difficult to distinguish, so there are all kinds of people who live alongside us who – for many who look on – seem quite difficult to distinguish from the followers of Jesus. There are plenty of seemingly "good" people around who are actually pretty strongly opposed to Jesus and all that he stands for. To take just one maybe trivial example: many of you will have read about or seen television features about "The Sunday Assembly". It's a bunch of avowed atheists who get together in a public hall in London (although it's being rolled out to the provinces as well) and have what to all intents and purposes is a service every Sunday. They sing vapid songs of niceness such as John Lennon's excruciating *Imagine*, read from some eminent philosopher, listen to someone telling them how to be nice to each other, and have a cup of coffee afterwards. But the underlying agenda is the sabotaging of religion. It looks just like the followers of Jesus, but the purpose is totally at odds with Jesus' mission.

And not only are there great surface similarities between the wheat and the weeds, between the followers of Jesus and the agents of – well, let's face it – evil, but also, under the surface, everything is tangled up, the roots are all entwined. We live in a highly complex society. However much we might try to stick closely to what Jesus teaches, we are going to find ourselves compromised in some way or other. In a society which has increasingly complicated economic relationships undergirding all that we do – how's your pension fund invested, for example? – and is reliant for its defence on a standing army – how does that square with some of Jesus' more radical pronouncements? – and has ambition and competition at the heart of its education system, and has some very funny comedians indeed whose language and worldview are quite disgusting, how can we claim to live with a single-minded purity that is based solely on the words of The Sermon On The Mount? It's not at all easy is it? None of us can claim to have our roots completely disentangled from the roots of the weeds.

So this Kingdom is a bit more complex than we might at first think. Why, then, doesn't God just zap everyone who is doing wrong and get them out of the way? Exactly because it is so complex. In the past, wide-eyed and enthusiastic leaders in the Church have tried to root out the evil with various strategies, many of them involving violence. Look at The Spanish Inquisition, the Wars of Religion, the Crusades, the abortion clinic bombers and gay-haters in parts of the United States – and look at the seemingly innocent people who have been caught up in all that, the greater evils that have been perpetrated in the name of God. (Or look at the way the Taliban operate to try and keep their view of the Kingdom of God – because that's what it is – pure and untarnished.)

God exercises his patience and is waiting "*until the harvest*". Here, as in many other places in the Bible, "harvest" is used as a metaphor for the final judgement, the "*end of the age*". God's going to sort things out. This Kingdom will be fulfilled. Don't worry about that. God will keep his word. The prophecies and predications of the Old Testament, the warnings and promises of Jesus, the astonishing vision of *Revelation* – we believe they will all come to pass. At the end of the age – and we unfortunately cannot tell exactly when that will be, but it is moving inexorably closer – God's agents will "*weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil*". Then "*the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father*".

And God exercises that patience in order to give people an opportunity to repent, to get themselves right with him. If God were to rip up all the people tainted by evil today, how many of us would survive? He's continually giving us time to reach out to him and to allow the Holy Spirit to make us more like Jesus. Listen to some of these words from the New Testament:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. (1 Timothy 1:16)

Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance? (Romans 2:4)

So, God is in control. We have to believe that in this, as in everything else, he knows what he is doing. And if he is patiently waiting to set things right, shouldn't we have some of that same patience? That doesn't mean we don't feel keenly the evil and injustice that there is in this world, but it does mean that we allow ourselves to trust in God. We do all that we can to alleviate and mitigate the effects of evil by reaching out to the poor, the sick, the disadvantaged and disenfranchised. We demonstrate the love of God in our words and behaviour in the hope that it might have an effect on those who have yet to decide for Christ. We talk about the eventual triumph of good over evil, the final harvest that is surely coming. But we recognise that this Kingdom is as yet imperfect and incomplete, as God waits patiently for as many men and women as possible to turn to him. Yes, weep for the injustice and evil in this world. Pray fervently for God to act. Do all that you can to live according to the teaching and example of Jesus. But believe that God is in control and trust him to do things his way. After all, he knows best.

"FOLLOWING THE KING - 35"
Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

Jesus has started to make it clear that he is the one to usher in the promised sovereign rule of God, this longed-for Kingdom – and he has, indeed, offered the people in the area around Galilee all kinds of glimpses of this Kingdom. But, the people might have been entitled to ask, where is the fullness of this Kingdom? When's everything going to turn out the way they've been led to believe?

And people still ask such questions today. We've got the crucifixion and resurrection, and a great deal more New Testament writings and a couple of millennia of theological musings to throw into the mix as well. If Jesus is who he said he was, if he had truly come to set up this Kingdom of peace and justice and joy, what's gone wrong?

So Jesus tells this story about someone sowing his seed. His fields are planted with wheat and the green shoots have started to push up through the ground. But one night, someone who has a grudge against this farmer gets into the fields and sows weeds as well. These weeds were put there on purpose so they would have been thickly sown. They were darnel, something that looks very much like wheat until it's almost fully mature – and the roots of the darnel would have got completely tangled in with the roots of the wheat under the surface. So the boss tells his labourers to leave them all growing together. He says they are to wait until the harvest when the weeds will finally be easy to spot and they can be sifted out from the wheat much more easily, tied up into bundles and used as fuel for their fires.

Then Jesus gives them a very clear explanation. Jesus/the Son of Man is at work in the world, represented by the field. And in this world there are good people, people who are prepared to follow him and to allow God to shape their lives – and there are people who are *"sons of the evil one"*, those on whose lives the influence of the devil seems to be stronger. Jesus has come announcing and inaugurating this Kingdom, but the world is still full of people who are doing wrong.

Well, just like that darnel that was scattered in the wheat field and was so difficult to distinguish, so there are all kinds of people who live alongside us who – for many who look on – seem quite difficult to distinguish from the followers of Jesus. And not only are there great surface similarities between the followers of Jesus and the agents of evil, but also, under the surface, everything is tangled up, the roots are all entwined. We live in a highly complex society. However much we might try to stick closely to what Jesus teaches, we are going to find ourselves compromised in some way or other.

God exercises his patience and is waiting *"until the harvest"*. Here, as in many other places in the Bible, "harvest" is used as a metaphor for the final judgement, the *"end of the age"*. God's going to sort things out. This Kingdom will be fulfilled. God will keep his word. But God exercises patience in order to give people an opportunity to repent, to get themselves right with him. Look at *2 Peter 3:9, 1 Timothy 1:16, Romans 2:4*. Do all that you can to live according to the teaching and example of Jesus. But believe that God is in control and trust him to do things his way. After all, he knows best.

Questions for discussion

1. Do you ever wonder about the apparent discrepancy between the coming of the Kingdom and the presence of evil in the world? How do you resolve it?
2. In what ways do you find yourself and your Christian beliefs compromised by the complexities of our society and culture? Can we do anything about that?
3. What do you think about apparently "good" people who are not Christians (and about apparent Christians who are clearly rather bad!)?
4. If God's going to sort it all out in the end, why should we bother trying to do anything about the evil in the world? (There are Christians who oppose, for example, environmentalism or poverty relief on these grounds.)