

## SERMON PREACHED AT SJH TRINITY 6 WEEK 16 19 JULY 2020

Last week, this week and next, the gospel reading comes from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of S. Matthew: a chapter of parables. Most of them have an agricultural setting. Last week we heard the parable of the sower and its explanation; today it's the parable of the wheat and the weeds with its explanation; next week it will be a series of shorter parables. Reading the whole chapter in one sitting can increase our understanding, as we encounter the different pictures Jesus paints about the good news of the kingdom of heaven, coming at the same subject from different angles. We'll also read short passages skipped over by the readings as set, which contrast disciples who understand the teaching with other people who don't. There's a definite sense of some are on the inside, some are on the outside.

This is acted out in the narrative of chapter 13. Jesus tells all the parables to the crowds. But in today's reading we hear

<sup>36</sup> Then Jesus left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.'

The crowds, who may or may not understand the parable, are outside. As I suggested last week concerning the parable of the sower, 'not understanding' includes 'refusal to understand' – rejection of Jesus' teaching. The disciples, who have made the decision to follow Jesus, are definitely inside the house. In modern terms, it's a binary situation: you're either in or out. You can't be halfway.

Today's parable is also binary in its content. Wheat is good. Weeds are bad. The two grow entwined with each other, but wheat plants cannot become weeds, nor weeds become wheat. It's similar to other parables found only in Matthew's gospel. There's the parable of the sheep and the goats (25.31-46): people are either, in the terms of the parable, amongst the sheep or amongst the goats. That parable also ends with the separation of the righteous from the evil, with reward or punishment. Another example is the parable of the ten bridesmaids (25.1-13). Five are wise and bring oil for their lamps; five are foolish and bring none. The bridesmaids are either wise or foolish, nothing in between. The final separation there is the arrival of the bridegroom and the closing of the door to the wedding banquet. The wise are inside, the foolish outside.

We can look at today's parable – as all parables – from three viewpoints. The first is that of Jesus' own time and ministry. He sowed the good seed – proclaimed the kingdom – and people either followed him or they didn't. The two groups would co-exist in the present age, but when the

kingdom came (and Jesus' message was that it was 'at hand') the everlasting parting of the ways would come.

The second viewpoint is that of Matthew when he wrote the gospel, and the situation of the church at that time. There was no mass communication, so it could have been for just one or a limited number of Christian communities in a small locality that Matthew wrote. We can't be certain, but it's probable that they were quite small, facing opposition, and trying to show they were different from the local synagogue or other religious groups. In such circumstances a 'them and us', 'inside or outside' feeling easily develops. The prospect that God would act decisively to vindicate followers of Jesus was a strength at a difficult time. There is also the darker possibility that having weeds and wheat growing together indicates that there might be some within the church who were not true followers of Jesus.

You've probably guessed that the third viewpoint is from our own time and situation. Two thousand years on and the angelic reapers, or whatever they represent, have not come. We feel we're firmly in the present age, with its mixture of good and evil bound together. If we're standard Anglicans, we probably don't have a sharp dividing line between those who are in and those who are out. The Church of England is the established church, existing for all citizens, which creates all sorts of fuzziness. We rightly suspect religious groups who feel that they alone are 'the children of the kingdom' and everyone else has got it wrong, and is bound for damnation.

We must guard against making parables say more than they intend. The themes of this parable are original goodness, evil alongside good in the present, and future restoration by the action of God in Christ. It's close to the statement of S. Paul in the passage from his letter to the Romans which we heard earlier:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. (8.18)

The power of parables is that they are stories, which if we have ears to hear, will set us thinking in different ways. We might 'internalise' the parable, and recognise that there is good and evil within each one of us. This produces the possibility of change, and here we are going beyond what can be argued from the parable. We call the change repentance, though the opposite can also happen: persistence in sin. There are other parables of Jesus which are about repentance, particularly in S. Luke's gospel. Think of the parable of the prodigal son (15.11-32), which, like the wheat and

weeds, begins with goodness and ends with restoration. But in between the evil and the good are within the person. There is change. A person who was outside comes back in. It is not binary.

The more we think about Jesus' parables, the more we get out of them. I find them fascinating and challenging for our own circumstances. I hope I've shown today that one parable can be illuminated by the others Jesus told. Are we among those who understand?