

Zoom Church.

Dr Ruth Shatford

St Alban's Epping Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> July 2020, The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-11, 23-24; Romans 6:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

In the gospel reading today, we virtually pick up where we left off last week. Chapters 12 and 13 of Matthew are very busy with parables and you might have noted that today, the lectionary omits some verses between the parable of the wheat and the weeds and the explanation Jesus gave of it. I suspect this is to focus our attention on this parable rather than allow the two other short parables in between to distract us.

I am planning today to consider some background and context to the parable and to conclude by leaving us with some thoughts about applying the parable in our own time and situation – some thinking that we all need to engage in.

It is easy for us to be rather puzzled about these agricultural parables, when we see neat country Australian or European fields with planting in geometric rows and often fenced or otherwise well defined. How did the seed in last week's parable come to be spread across such a range of soils – shallow soil, rocky soil and so on. Most of our planting on a commercial basis is done mechanically with a furrow being drilled in a straight line in uniformly enriched soil and the seed is regularly and evenly deposited in it by a machine. In Jesus' day, there were not well defined borders or fences to the fields used for growing wheat and the farmer went out with a container of seed, usually a wide basket, and walked along strewing it with a wide sweep of his arm so that the grain fell here and there onto soil of very varying quality. Apparently it was not unknown for a malicious person to come along later and strew the seeds of weeds in a similar pattern. One scholar says that it is still an Indian threat of the worst kind to say "I will sow bad seed in your field."

It is interesting to know that the weed type referred to, which is common in Israel, is called "bearded darnel". Even an experienced farmer cannot reliably distinguish it from wheat when the two are growing together. If an attempt is made to take out the weeds, it is likely that the farmer will overlook some and will also pull out some of the wheat, so closely alike are they. When these plants are close to maturity, and ready for harvest, the heads of the wheat, full to ripeness, droop, but the darnel heads stand upright. By then, the roots deep in the soil are entangled, and it is damaging to the good crop to try to pull the weeds then. They need to be harvested together and then separated. At that point, the shape and size of the grains are very similar but the darnel grains are a slate grey and so can be distinguished after harvesting. It is not surprising that the Jews called darnel "bastard wheat". It is important to get the sorting right at this stage to maintain the quality of the wheat and not introduce into the grain for milling for food, a seed that is unpleasantly bitter, mildly poisonous, and a narcotic.

By the time this gospel was written, Matthew, also known sometimes as Levi, formerly a tax collector, appears to have been the leader of an ancient, settled and distinguished community. Much of Matthew's gospel is taken from the earlier Gospel of Mark, but no doubt, Matthew had concerns on his mind, when he wrote up what Jesus' interpretation of the parable was, the interpretation given in private a while later on their request, to his disciples. Matthew connects each detail of the parable to an aspect of the situation of early church congregations – loss of

faith, the effect of persecution and tribulation, the detrimental effects of an easy life for some and their worldly concerns.

Over the last say fifty years, there has been significant research brought to bear on preaching on Matthew. Scholars formerly used New Testament writings to reconstruct, with questionable accuracy, what the historical Jesus had actually been like, a complex and not essentially reliable task. Then there was a move to compare the texts of Mark and the derivative text of Matthew, often with colour coded synopses of what matched up and what did not, in their writings. In recent years, scholarship has benefitted from more careful reading of the text and also Jewish research into Matthew's gospel which has eliminated many of the stereotypical assumptions about Judaism as a religion. Part of that revision was the result of the discovery and then the publication 40 years ago of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were not only richly informative in themselves, but stimulated the study of other little-considered documents of the period. In this light, most scholars, reviewing the sometimes disputed Matthew 5, now see that Jesus strongly asserted the validity of the Law; the contrast is not between the Law and Jesus' teaching, but between how the Law was being heard and how Jesus was interpreting it. If then, Matthew and his community saw themselves as sitting in the framework of Judaism, it would have been in the midst of controversy and conflict. Matthew wrote this to be read out aloud to his congregation; did they see themselves as followers of Jesus but still as observant Jews, or did they see themselves as a Christian community separate from Judaism or maybe somewhere in between? There must have been in that community a great deal of discussion as to what a follower of Jesus believed. There must have been considerable heartache as they tried to determine what their community identity was. And how should they interpret what Matthew told them Jesus had told his intimate followers who asked earnestly for an interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the weeds? How would it apply to them? Did they wonder if they themselves were wheat or weeds? How did this teaching of leaving it to the reapers at the end of time to separate the wheat and the weeds, fit with the questions of whether to stay in the local synagogue or establish a separate church?

In Fr Paul's sermon last week, on the parable of the sower or the parable of the soil as it is often known, we learnt that the seed stood for the word of God and the field stood for the people or the hearts of people. Already Matthew was speaking of a division between the unreceptive hearer of the Christian message and the receptive Christian disciple. Today's gospel reading follows straight on and takes this point further. It is no wonder that Jesus' disciples privately afterwards asked Jesus for an explanation of what he meant by this parable. It is reasonable to think that with the earlier parable still ringing in their ears, they would have assumed the same meaning attributed to the familiar agricultural setting. But, Jesus was very explicit in unpacking the latter parable for them, much more complex in its structure than the earlier parable, with seven analogies:

- The sower is Jesus.
- The field is the world – not this time the people or their hearts.
- The enemy is the devil,
- the good seed represents the children of God – not this time the word of God.
- The tares or weeds are the children of the devil,
- the harvest is the end of the world and
- the reapers are God's heavenly messengers, the angels.

Matthew seems to be envisaging three kingdoms – that of the evil one founded in this world, the kingdom of the Father where the righteous are rewarded and an interim kingdom of the Son which can be identified with the present church, containing good and evil.

So how does this apply to us in our day and age and in our context?

There seem to be four main considerations for us to take into account:

1. We need to be aware that there will be hostile forces seeking to influence and even destroy in the world and the church.
2. It may well be hard to distinguish the good from the evil by appearances.
3. We need to be patient and slow to judge, waiting till the harvest.
4. Jesus spoke about his interim ministry of healing and teaching and of his role as judge at the end of time. Judgment does ultimately come, but that is not our role. It belongs to God alone.

There is still on record a sermon on this parable given by Martin Luther in 1525. In emphasising that we are not to uproot and destroy, Luther points out that the church in his time and prior to that, had disobeyed this teaching of Jesus. He saw the church as having “raged and forced others to believe” and notes they had killed Turks by the sword, had burnt so-called heretics and had put Jews to death.

Perhaps today’s Old Testament lesson is salutary in showing us how God, in patience was able to transform and use the unattractive, dishonest, scheming Jacob. God exemplified this patience. The books of the Old Testament recount a thousand of years of Jewish history during which time God called and formed his people, watched over them through times of prosperity and disaster, waited for them as they fell away and returned to him, before in the fullness of time sending his son to redeem them. So often for the people there seemed to be long periods of absence or inaction on the part of this patient God.

One preacher on our parable commends a section from Benedictine Daily Prayer: “Although you are sovereign in strength, you judge with mildness, and with great forbearance, you govern us for you have power to act when you choose. Through such works, you have taught your people that the righteous or the just must be kind.” God exemplifies the patience the parable urges on us and the avoidance of the temptation or the knee jerk reaction to judge.

The master and the servant in the parable must both wait, respecting the process of time, waiting for the harvest when time shall be no more, which is more important than what one commentator calls “clearing a pure space”.

An English Jesuit speaking of the patience and perseverance urged by this passage tells us that as a constant reminder to himself, Pope Francis has outside his bedroom door a painting, the original of which was executed by Schmidtner in Augsburg, Germany, in 1700. It is oddly called “Our Lady, Untier of Knots” and depicts Mary standing in a crescent moon and working away with her hands trying to unknot a ball of string. The straightened end of the string looks much shorter than what remains with lots of knots, being passed up to her by an angel. It seems a quirky representation of patience, but sometimes the quirkiest the mnemonic, the more memorable the idea! We all have a lot of knots ahead of us!



Johann Georg Schmidtner, *Mary, Untier of Knots* c. 1700

See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary,\\_Untier\\_of\\_Knots](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary,_Untier_of_Knots)

Pope Francis has a reproduction of this painting outside his bedroom.

Let me finish by reading again the four considerations derived from this parable, that I hope we, as members of this congregation will reflect on:

1. We need to be aware that there will be hostile forces seeking to influence and even destroy in the world and the church.
2. It may well be hard to distinguish the good from the evil by appearances.
3. We need to be patient and slow to judge, waiting till the harvest.
4. Jesus spoke about his interim ministry of healing and teaching and of his role as judge at the end of time. Judgment does ultimately come, but that is not our role. It belongs to God alone.