

LEYLAND UNITED REFORMED CHURCH
SERMON: Sunday 23rd July 2017

Readings: Matthew 13.24-30,36-43; Romans 8.12-25

Address

Maybe we're not quite as familiar with today's parable of the sower. We know the one about throwing seeds all over the place and then finding out whether they fall on the path, on rocky ground, among weeds, or on good soil. But this time the sowing is very careful.

Good seed is especially selected, and if care is taken in this part, it would be pretty safe to assume that care was also taken to prepare the ground well too. But even with all this preparation things go wrong. The next morning weeds are also growing in the field among the wheat. Now all this gets blamed on an enemy. Something has gone wrong, so a mysterious enemy gets all the blame!

Question for anyone who has ever had a garden: where the weeds in your garden ever planted by a mysterious stranger? Clearly not. Weeds are weeds, they just spring up because they can. The wind blows, birds do their thing, they wait around since last year, and up pops a weed. Now the definition of a weed is 'any plant growing in the wrong place'.

We decide that something is a weed. It's where we'd rather have something else, so it gets labelled a weed. There is also the definition of a plant, which is one that comes up easily when pulled.

The farmer sees his field, full of wheat and weeds, and orders the workers to leave things alone until harvest. Pulling up the weeds will probably do more harm than good, so leave it all until the end when everything needs to be removed anyway. Then when harvest comes the wheat is gathered into the barn and the weeds are placed on the bonfire.

If we stopped our reading here we could draw some parallels with our passage from Romans. We have a field full of things we want and don't want, and we wait until an appropriate time to sort them out.

In Romans, we are encouraged to live according to the Spirit and not the flesh, to be wheat not weeds. In the Spirit, we are children of God, adopted not enslaved, brothers and sisters of Christ, and sharing in his suffering and his glory.

The suffering of their present situation is acknowledged but they are over-shadowed by the glory to come. We share with Creation in its groans waiting for transformation, waiting in hope, trusting in God, patiently waiting.

If we stopped our reading from Matthew before the explanation then we can draw comforting parallels. Our lives, the life of the world, is like a field where both wheat and weeds, both good and bad things grow. Now we struggle with this. We try our best to be good, to be like wheat, but more often than we'd like we get entangled with the weeds and don't take the better path. Struggling with the wheat and the weeds is part of life. Jesus shared those struggles, and in faith, living in the Spirit, trusting in God, we wait patiently for God to transform us and the world. Life is struggle, but glory awaits us.

If we leave the parable to speak for itself it opens up possibilities for us. We can think about things in our lives that are like wheat, and we can celebrate them. We can acknowledge things that are more like weeds, and we can try to cut them back. We can do this reassured that Jesus and Creation shares our struggle, and that glory awaits us.

Unfortunately, our reading from Matthew doesn't stop here. Rather than leaving the parable to speak for itself, to open it up to a myriad of applications and situations, it is narrowed down to one.

As I said before we heard it, it's likely that this is Matthew's interpretation of what Jesus meant. If this is so, then taking into account Matthew's context may also be helpful. Matthew was writing for a community in conflict with the Jewish faith it was breaking away from and with the Roman authorities that were persecuting it. So, Matthew reassures his readers that they are the good wheat, and all of the people who are causing them problems now will get their comeuppance eventually.

Jesus has sown the good seed, the Church has nurtured and grown it and will be gathered into the eternal barn. When Jesus returns, which was their imminent expectation, all the bad people (all the non-Christians) will be burned up in the eternal furnace.

Despite all of the scaremongering, Christianity is not persecuted in this country. We are ignored, and on occasion ridiculed for stamping our feet and declaring obvious truths which the rest of society clearly doesn't understand as such. We are faced with apathy, not aggression.

We could choose to hold tight to Matthew's explanation of this parable and turn to our non-church going neighbours and make threats of them being cast into the furnace of fire and their eternal weeping and gnashing of teeth. In Matthew's context this reassured his community, and gave them something to shout at their adversaries and captors.

If we do the same to our generally well-meaning but not interested neighbours, all that does is convince them that faith is just as irrelevant as they thought.

So, let us go back and let the parable speak for itself. The world is full of good and bad things. They are all so entangled it can be hard to know for sure which is which, but we hope on the other side of eternity it will be clear. All we can do is concentrate on the good, on tending the wheat, on striving after what we know to be of God, to be to the good.

We've got enough weeding to do in our own lives to waste time complaining about the state of anyone else's. We have enough to worry about working out what is the wheat and the weeds for us, to be pointing out what we think are someone else's weeds. Life is a beautiful, wonderful mess, and it's better to concentrate on our own weeding.

Yes, there are some weeds we have in common and we have a role to try to remove the weeds of injustice, greed and hatred in our society. But when it comes to someone else's weeds we need to remember another of Jesus stories, about splinters and planks, and concentrate on our own problems.

As Church we can help each other do some weeding, but that should always be a mutual conversation. If you were helping someone else with their garden you wouldn't just turn up and recreate your own garden – you'd talk, celebrate special plants, check whether what you think are weeds are what they think, and you'd respect their space.

So, it goes when we try to help each other to follow Jesus, to weed our lives so we can be more like him. We are all challenged to do some weeding, and we are all assured that determining what the weeds are is down to us too.

We are all children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, each uniquely called to follow the way of Christ. We are called to weed, to struggle, and trust that glory awaits us.

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. **Amen**