



Sermon: - 23rd July 2017

Faithful improvisation

Romans 8: 12-25, Matthew 13: 24-30

During the Second World War, the Japanese, in common with all nations involved in the conflict, were in the habit of incarcerating people in prisoner of war camps. These prisoners were not necessarily soldiers; some of you may remember television series *Tenko* from a number of years back which dealt with the experiences of British, Australian and Dutch women who were captured after the Fall of Singapore in February 1942, after the Japanese invasion. Having been separated from their husbands and families, herded into makeshift holding camps, the women had to learn to cope with appalling living conditions, malnutrition, disease, violence and death. Despite these appalling conditions the Japanese did show some compassion to the prisoners. They repatriated any women who were pregnant.

Amongst the prisoners was one young woman who had been separated from her husband and very young children. She saw no prospect of being released to return to her family. However, she struck up a relationship with one of the guards. She had a strong Christian belief, and she knew that adultery was wrong, however she also knew that it was wrong that she was separated from her husband and family. She became pregnant and was repatriated. She had the baby and the boy was raised in her family, treated with particular love and care because he had been the cause of her being reunited with the rest of the family. She could have taken a different route and remained in the POW camp till the end of the war, however the chances of her living until the end of the war would have been slim – the death rate in these camps was extremely high. She made a choice which for her was the lesser of two evils. Good and evil are rarely black and white. Choices are rarely simple.

I think there is a sense in which this is what this parable is saying to us. Good and bad grow up side-by-side. Recently I was in conversation with a farmer and I asked him how he dealt with weeds among the wheat. What he described was exactly the practice outlined in the parable we read today; the weeds are allowed to grow alongside the wheat until both are fully grown and then the weeds can be easily separated. The problem is that some weeds, and sometimes the most pernicious and dangerous, some of them actually poisonous, can't be distinguished from the wheat until the ear appears and to uproot them too early risks damaging the crop and losing the precious wheat along with the weeds.

In parable this parable, the presence of the weeds is described as the result of the activity of an enemy, but it seems to me that that presents a picture which is too black-and-white to present the complexities of human life. I think this parable deserves a more complex reading than that. In reality, any of us who are gardeners know that weeds will sprout up anywhere there is a grain of soil. And perhaps, in our experience, that is more realistic. Good and evil grow side-by-side. Bad things are rarely the result of deliberate activity on the part of someone who is evil or an enemy. Rather they are part of our experience of life, in this beautiful, wonderful world which nevertheless, as Paul tells us, is in bondage to decay and groans for release. The experience of evil, of wrong things, of hurtful and damaging events is part of the human condition.

On first reading it would be too easy to assume that each stalk of wheat, each weed, represents a single human being, and that the field represents the world out of which the weeds will be removed on the judgement day. However, what if, for example, we can't tell the difference between the wheat and the weeds? As my farmer friend said, we would need to wait until both were fully grown to discern which was which. You can see in this picture how similar they are, and how alike they would be when they were initially sprouting from the earth. Perhaps then, the parable is encouraging us not to judge too quickly or too harshly. How can we tell whether someone is open to God or closed to God? Can we see their heart? Can we see what they will become if God is allowed the time and space to work in their lives? Of course, we can't, and the parable of the wheat and the tares encourages us to give people time, to allow God to work in their lives, for him to make the judgement at the end of the day.

But I think there is another lesson in this parable. Rather than considering the world as divided into good people and bad people, perhaps the wheat and the tares relate to us as individuals. What if each of us is, in a sense, a field with fruitful parts and bad bits? If we are honest with ourselves we know that we are fallible human beings, capable of being selfish and self-centred even as we are also capable of being caring and altruistic. We all have our moments of weakness; of selfishness, anger, jealousy, materialism, greed, even as we are also generous, loving, helpful, committed and compassionate. And sometimes it can be difficult to tell the difference. My family often criticise me for doing things which I think are helpful but which they experience as unhelpful. They say to me, "I know you mean well". They say to me, "why didn't you ask?" My good intentions produce bad fruit

not good fruit because I do not always know best! The truth is that, no matter how hard we try, we are incapable of producing only good fruit all the time.

As the traditional prayer of confession expresses it; we sin against God and against our neighbour, in what we think, in what we say, in what we do, and in what we leave undone; we sin through ignorance, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault.

It is tempting in considering this parable to wanted to pull up the weeds at the earliest opportunity. It is tempting to want to eradicate from the world, or the church, all that seems antithetical to the purposes of God, all that is bad, all that is wrong. But what if in pulling up the weeds we found ourselves pulled up too? What if, in our fragile and far from perfect state, we resembled weeds, not yet sufficiently fully developed to be identified as wheat? The parable cautions against this. The parable cautions against early judgements, not only about people but also about the deeds and actions that people, including ourselves, offer. The Bible tells us that in the final analysis our work will be tested by fire. What that means is that the fruit of our whole lives will be judged by God who will decide what parts of our lives, in all our thoughts and deeds, is worthy and what is unworthy. And that can only be done when our lives in all their fullness are finally offered to God when we meet him face-to-face.

This parable tells us that the opportunity to develop and grow into the fullness of the image of God is offered to everyone, regardless of who or what they are. But it also reminds us that we are not perfect and that it is not ours to judge others. Interestingly, the word in verse 30 translated "let" as in, "let both grow together," could also have been translated "forgive". It is not our place to judge, perhaps instead we can be more forgiving of those we consider weeds, or the weeds in others' lives, or even the weeds in our own lives, and leave the judging up to God.

As Paul points out in the letter to the Romans, the frustration of our worldwide experience of decay, discord and damage will not go away soon. As I was saying earlier, in spite of there being enough food to go around, one in nine of us go to bed hungry. The world, too, awaits redemption. But the letter to the Romans is not written to depress us; rather it is meant to give us hope and to encourage our faith, God has a plan, and he will bring that plan to fruition.

Ultimately, I think what we are called to in these two passages is a kind of faithful improvisation. The world is not perfect, we are not perfect, we have to do the best we can with what we have, with whom we are. There will come a day when the weeds will be uprooted; the evil in the world which has always sought to undermine the purposes of God will be eradicated. There will come a day when the weeds will be uprooted; those things within each of us which also undermine the purposes of God, even when we don't mean it and sometimes when we don't know it will be burned away. Until that day, all we can do, the best we can do, and all that God is asking us to do, if I read this parable aright, is to continue in faith, being faithful, to the best of our ability, in the strength that God gives us, even although we only see through the glass darkly, even although we don't always know whether what we are doing will produce wheat or weeds. Until that day, we have to have faith that God is working his purposes out and that ultimately his purposes will be served. Until that day, we should not be too eager to uproot what we consider to be weeds, we might just find that we have uprooted the wheat by mistake.