

Weeds are a very strange thing!

The year I finished school I helped on our farm getting rid of weeds from pasture. This involved a rusty bucket, a pair of secateurs, and pair of leather gloves; and walking around a hillside for hours every day. I was cutting the seed pods of scotch thistles which were in plague proportions on the hillside. We had to cut off the seed pods before the thistles were cut, otherwise there would be even more thistles.

In the part of Australia where I come from the Scotch Thistle was categorised as a noxious weed. It had been introduced to the gardens of early scot settlers, but in the misty hills of Australia it appeared to have no natural enemies and flourished to the point of being a weed.

I remember when I first moved to London being horrified to see a Scotch Thistle flower, just like the ones I had spent days cutting off as a teenager for sale in a high end London Florist for £5! Surely this was a weed! And yet, in a different community, on a different island, what to me was a weed, was a beautiful flower to others.

What is a weed can often depend on how we see things, or where we see things. To a crop of wheat, weeds, anything which is not wheat, bring down the value of the crop and can contaminate the seed.

In today's Gospel reading from Matthew we are given a very difficult parable about weeds, and how in the end they will be thrown into the fire. This parable was so powerful at the time of telling it, it was one of the reasons that Jesus opponents sought to have him killed. They thought he was drawing parallels to them being weeds and bringing down the value of God's message.

But maybe this wasn't Jesus intention at all. Rather than separating the evil out, what if this parable is actually about the fact that evil or disappointment is always with us, and so throughout life it is something that is there. It is for God in the end to decide what is the evil, rather than us banishing a group we think are weeds.

Allegory is dangerous, because we can assume we know who the examples in the story are, or who is the intended audience. But sometimes we need to be very careful that our assumptions don't cause us to step into the realms of evil ourselves. Genocide, racism, oppression and even hatred, can be the result of wrongly assigning what we perceive to be evil, what we think are weeds.

It can be too easy when things are going wrong to say the problem is caused by those people or those weeds. The experience of the servants in the parable – frustrated that things have gone awry, eager to make it right even to the point of risking damage to something important start to apportion blame, first the it was bad seed, or bad soil. But the master puts blame on foreigners who have come by night and planted weeds. It is a powerful image. Jesus explanation is incredibly difficult, as he focuses on the work of the devil.

The danger is that this parable has been used to exclude many. Assigning name or blame to those who are perceived to be evil or 'the work of the devil' – when we just are frustrated or don't understand.

David Lose points out *How many times have we felt like "an enemy has done this"? When the cancer returns, when the job goes away, when the relationship ends, when depression sets in, when addiction robs a loved one (or ourselves) of life, when a loved one's life is cut short, when war forces thousands to flee as refugees, when the world turns its back on people in need. At these times, the sense that this world is not what God intended can be almost unbearable, and you don't have to believe in a red-suited devil with a pointy tail and pitchfork to name the reality of sin, brokenness, and evil in the world.*¹

But this parable is not about explaining why there is evil in the world, or that things are part of God's plan. Though I do think this parable can be used to at least acknowledge that we do experience evil in our lives. But more importantly, once we have acknowledged this evil, we must note that evil is not God's design or desire!

Too often, when bad things happen, I hear people say 'this must be God's plan' ... but if nothing else in this parable speaks to us, let us hear the clear message that the weeds, the evil is not planted by God. Evil is not part of God's plan, and God has no desire for evil to be part of our lives. But sometimes it is. And sometimes painful and difficult things happen.

God's image in this parable is of one who wants us to flourish, wants us to grow and not be suffocated by weeds. The difficult message is also that we do not always know the full story and in the end, it will be God who will judge. Another difficult image for many.

So with so many difficult images, and uncomfortable parables – where do we find faith?

At this point of writing my sermon, I had to go over to the church to sort out some things ready for our service this morning. I was carrying a number of things, and as I went to step up into the church, one of the items moved in my hands and I managed to twist my foot on the edge of the step. It hurt a great deal, and it was quite difficult to walk. The first thing I caught myself saying was 'seriously God, what are you thinking, there is too much to do today!'

But God did not hurt me, or cause this to happen. I was tired and I wasn't paying attention and so I had a small accident. It think one of the challenges of faith and of this parable is that it can be too easy in giving all over to God, to then blame God for things which are in our own control, or are just things that happen. Hurting my foot was not part of God's plan, though it did make me slow down.

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/07/pentecost-7-a-on-the-question-of-evil/>

In the end there is much pain around us, but faith encourages to be confident of God's judgment, mercy, and redemption; and that we can nurture the wheat and strengthen what is good all around you. Faith also reminds us to be vigilant in what we name as evil, and to be wary about scapegoating.

God reminds us to not be overcome by fear and evil but rather trust. This is the gift in the vision we heard earlier from Isaiah. *"Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one."* (Isaiah 44.8)

Our courage, our hope, our ability to be nurtured comes from that fact that despite all else we are witnesses to God's love. This passage from Isaiah provides a powerful witness to us living in a time marked by anxiety. These ancient words remind us that we do not go into the future alone or without resources. We are part of a community created and named by God, redeemed and blessed by God, chosen by God to be a "light to the nations" (42:6).²

We are not alone. Scripture bears witness to the power and faithfulness of God. We bear witness to that power and faithfulness in our lives as well by moving past fear and practicing trust. It doesn't mean things will always go our way, but rather whatever we face, we never face it alone. Amen.

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3349