

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, and pair of secateurs, a 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 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.

It 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. The farmer plants some wheat, but overnight another comes and plants weeds. The workers want to know who to blame. This parable was so powerful at the time of its telling, 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.

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.

But this parable is not about explaining why there is evil in the world, or that things are part of God's plan. Though it can be used to recognise that we do experience evil in our lives. But more importantly 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 there is evil. 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..

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

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 us. Faith also reminds us to be vigilant in what we name as evil, and to be wary about scapegoating.

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