

For the second week running we find ourselves in Matthew Ch. 13, it's a bit like the Gospel version of Gardener's Question time commented my wife as she prepared another mid-week reflection on seeds and crops and weeds. I suppose having spent some years in the civil service I've started to think of it more as "Jesus' agricultural policy" – the parable of the sower last week, this week the wheat and the weeds and next week the mustard seed and the treasure hidden in the field, all from this one chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel. Rural examples, referring not just to crops and to weeds and to seeds and to treasure, but to people – Jesus' real interest, the people he lived and loved and laughed amongst then and the people he lives amongst now, in the sharing of his love, in the proclamation of his word, in bread and wine. And the words Jesus spoke then to many who worked on the land and made their living from the fruit of the soil are just as pertinent today. Living here in the beauty of the Suffolk countryside we are, or we spend time with, those who make their living from the land, as farmers, farm managers, fruit growers and those who look after animals. To them Jesus' words are immediately fitting and familiar. Here is God who walked on the earth and knew the lie of the land. Who saw the patterns of the seasons and the ripening crops and gave praise to his heavenly father for them.

Particularly in these past few weeks and months Jesus' rural focus has become all the more pertinent as those of us who would have been getting on trains to London or driving off on motorways to other parts of the country have instead spent time walking the lanes and the footpaths of our villages, watching the crops grow and ripen.

There is wheat, we are told, and there are weeds. The one will be gathered, the other destroyed. And it's not easy to tell the two apart, not initially in any case, not when both are showing green shoots above the ground. The field of God's Church, the wheat, his people. But is there any sign of the weeds?

We, God's people, the people of his world are his wheat – the gospel stories spell out again and again his love and his care for us – a careful farmer tending his crops, gently and lovingly nurturing them, willing them to grow into strong healthy blades of wheat. Convincing us that we are of ultimate value, of ultimate worth, important enough to die for. But how often do we believe it? "You're not really a grain of wheat" says my subconscious. "You're a weed, a tare!" "He loves all the others but he doesn't love you" "You're just there in the field to do damage, to be a stumbling block - you're not really supposed to be in the field at all." The thoughts are convincing, plausible, I'm distracted for a

moment. But the voice of God is there again. “You ARE a sheaf of wheat, a bit battered maybe, a bit mis-shapen, not always grown in the best of soils, but wheat nonetheless, my wheat and I love you.” And we must learn to trust that voice, the voice of God in the Bible and in the world which tells us that we are his creation, we are precious in his sight and that he loves us all as his harvest, his sheaves of wheat.

Or course there are weeds in the Church. There are periods when it seems that the Church is hardly out of the news, not for the good reasons of the positive things happening within it, but from the negative things. Infighting, dis-unity, insults, abuses of every kind, for every one of these that happens in the name of the Church a weed is sown. For every child of God who is excluded, ignored, abused or discriminated against, that weed is nurtured and strengthened. And as the weeds are allowed to grow, the growth of the sheaves are impaired, the quality of the soil is poorer and the fruit is reduced.

But we are called to keep on growing where we can. To react with love where we find hatred being sown. To react with compassion where we find intolerance, and to sow the purposes of God and his priorities where we find the priorities of human beings taking over and becoming dominant. And to rejoice in the

continuing growth of the wheat, to encourage the healthy growth of the field of the Church and to encourage those who grow within it.

And we have reason to rejoice this morning as we gather for the second week running in buildings which have not seen public worship for nearly four months. For all the wonders of technology and live streaming, and for all that we are masked and distanced and deprived of singing and shaking hands and receiving the chalice, it is nonetheless great to be together once again even as we pray with and for those who are watching from home some of whom are looking forward to the day when they can be with us too just as we look forward to welcoming them.

But we come with new insights, new understanding about how our Church might become more inclusive, reach new people, with hope that we might not simply rush back into our old ways of life, but embrace a new way of being the Church of God in our Benefice, a Church which uses a variety of means to share God’s love, a Church which is open and welcoming to all, a Church which focusses on mission not meetings, worship not window dressing, where the contents of someone’s heart is more important than the contents of their CV. If this is where our focus is in the coming months then the Church will grow, we will see new people

who feel that they can be part of the Church. We long to welcome those whom God is calling to follow him in these villages and to Baptise them as children of God and members of his Church.

And what sort of Church is it that they are being baptised into? Well, that's up to us as its members. Is it a Church where the weeds of intolerance, suspicion and discord are sown abroad and allowed to flourish, inhibiting the growth of the precious wheat? Or is it somewhere where love and hope and peace are allowed to grow and to overcome everything else? In our manner and our way of living do we promote the healthy growth of the Church, do we plant the seeds of faith in those around us, by making Christianity vibrant and hopeful, or do we allow negativity and discord to take over?

Why did the Master allow the weeds and the wheat to grow together? Surely the wheat would be inhibited and damaged. But he knew that the wheat will flourish in the end and that some of those who the world views as weeds actually have a heart for God and will bring forth fruit in the end. So don't worry if you are concerned for the state of your own soul, if you are sometimes convinced that you are a weed rather than a grain of wheat, for God knows your heart and he knows if your heart is set on him

and if your desire is for his kingdom. He will continue to work in you and enable you to bring forth good fruit in the end.

St. Paul, speaking in our Reading from Chapter 8 of the letter to the Romans talks of us being glorified with Christ, which reminds me of Jacob's vision of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven. A ladder on which angels ascended and descended, a ladder which allowed heaven to touch earth. In our service this morning, at the blessing and breaking of bread and the pouring of wine, heaven will touch earth, and heavenly things will be placed into the hands of human beings. In this, the Church becomes the gate of heaven, the ladder which connects the dwelling of human beings to the dwelling of God. Let us pray that we may, by our lives and by our witness open the gate which is the Church as wide as possible, that all may enter and say, as Jacob did "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!"

Amen