

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

for Trinity 6 (19 July)

Matthew 13:24-30 + 36-43

More farming! Once again, Matthew shares with us some imagery that relates to planting, nurturing and reaping. Once again, we see the outcome of careful husbandry compared with a more reckless approach. This time, though, we do not have choices as we did last week – this time, it is a starker image of success or failure, with no middle ground.

For those of us who love gardening – and whose 'bible' is TV's "Gardeners' World" – weeds are the last thing we need! You spend ages preparing, planting, and standing back waiting. You gain great satisfaction from clearing a bed, of newly-tilled soil, of the sheer neatness of it all. And you wait. And 99% of the time, you have no idea what will happen next? When leaves and shoots appear, you stare at them: plant or weed? Remove it or leave it? The battle with nature never ends. Hopefully, all is successful; occasionally, a total mess.

Most of us gardeners just get on with it. Matthew's gardener seems to think similarly: just leave things alone, we will sort it, no problem. Sometimes, though, you can get annoyed, and the thought of consigning the 'intruder' into the flames of a bonfire is very satisfying! That will teach them. How dare they grow in my garden. Oh, for the return of the days when we could have a decent bonfire rather than all this 'sanitised' wheelie-bin nonsense ...

It can be hard work, though, ensuring good growth happens. Some soils are rubbish, some too difficult to manage, some utterly hopeless. In the Vicarage garden, I am continually plagued with wild borage seeds and roots – the whole garden is a haven for it, and left to its own devices, would totally cover all surfaces. What little decent soil there is becomes a magnet for it. Whether Matthew's land had such, who knows? In the climate of Palestine, darnel is a problem, so it is said, not least because when it starts to grow, it resembles the shoots of the wheat also planted – but it is a pernicious weed, and the last thing an arable farmer would want mixed in with his crop.

But Matthew's policy seems to be: leave it, let the two grow, and we will sort it later – for sort it they must if they want maximum return on their investment. Hard work for the labourers, though, having to separate out the two during harvest, reminding us that no situation is perfect, and every challenge needs to be met otherwise all hope will be lost.

It is easy to see why such a piece of scripture would have such resonance particularly in an agricultural world. If crops are your subsistence commodity, you need the best possible outcome for your endeavours; and the last thing you would be prepared to tolerate is anything that undermines such. Matthew sees a relationship with God in much the same way, and Jesus appears to be endorsing a clear and unambiguous approach to it all. Whilst last week's mixed-bag of different types of people and their attitude towards their faith gave scope for challenging variation, today's scripture is much more hard-line. You are either in or out. You are either a rich harvest or consigned to the fires of hell. There seems to be little in the way of negotiation!

So, how do we cope with this? In our gardens we could battle on, undeterred, resolute in our weeding, determined in our nurturing – or, we could simply walk away, forget it all, let the borage take over, and give up on keeping it neat. What we cannot do is simply pull the odd weed up, mooch about half-heartedly wondering what happens next, and then be surprised at the failure. Could we apply this same analogy to our faith? Could we follow Matthew's imagery, and realise that we could be seeds of wheat, but we might have morphed into that of darnel? The challenge is to want to be the former, surely – but sometimes it seems to be easier to be the latter. As fresh as weeds grow, we are continually aware of their strength. As easy as distracting influences can be, we need to be very aware of their strength.

To create the perfect garden for our seed of hope to blossom, we need it to be well-managed, and in our faith the key factor here is, of course, the nurturing power of God. We have all that we could possibly need in the openness of our relationship with Him. The setting is secure, the soil is near-perfect, the environment inviting, the sensation pleasantly overwhelming. The placing of ourselves within the reach of God gives to our existence the surround that we need to become more than just an entity. If I was to hold a mere seed in my hand, it would resemble nothing much at all – if I was to plant it in its optimal location, who knows what beauty may evolve. My skills are limited, but God's are not, and our faith convinces us of its outstanding value.

Being open to the influences of such a God realises all that is contained within us: the goodness, the potential, the beauty and the richness. Far from be strangled by the binding reality of the world at large, the power of faith released within gives the ability to out-manoeuvre it all, and forever be focussed upon a true determination to serve God, to follow His guiding power, and to fully blossom.

And it is through such that those around are influenced. The beauty we create enables the 'weeds' to be identified; they can be ignored, they can be overcome, they can be removed. They have no place because the radiance that we emit enlivens the garden of our lives, it brings vibrancy to its surroundings – and it reveals the attraction of it all. All of us can be 'wowed' by striking beauty in a well-tended garden – we should also be keen to 'wow' the world by our reflection of God's invigorating riot of colour. Matthew believes that the chosen will indeed "shine like the sun in the kingdom" – how wonderful to be part of that. After all, who wants to be borage when there is so much more!

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