

Sermon for All Saints' Cottenham with Rampton, 19 July 2020
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Jesus told many, many parables, stories with a meaning at different levels. Fortunately this is one of his easier ones and he spells out exactly what he means. But even so, we need to think about:

What was Jesus teaching people at the time, in first century Galilee?

What is the parable teaching us, today, in the twenty first century, in Cambridgeshire?

Firstly, what was Jesus teaching people in his own time? Jesus' parables were often about growing things for everyday life: wheat, grapes, olives etc. But surely he was Joseph the Carpenter's son from Nazareth. What did he know about growing wheat?

I've just finished reading a book by James Martin, an American Jesuit priest who is very down to earth and often funny too. A few years ago, he decided he wanted to travel around Israel to discover how 'the real Jesus' lived. In Nazareth, the home town of Jesus, he considered this question. How did Jesus know about farming and fishing and all those other occupations that he mentions in his parables. Surely he was actually a specialist in carpentry and building? He came to realise that of course Jesus the carpenter would have made many things out of wood for farmers: yokes for ploughing, hoes and threshing boards, wine and olive presses, the various parts of hand carts, sections of barns and so on.

James Martin also realised that in villages and small towns in first century Israel most families had a small bit of land to grow vegetables, fruit and maybe even wheat for their own families. That's very much like Cottenham and Rampton in the past. You can see this depicted in our two villages, on the banner in Rampton church, on the pew ends in Cottenham church, also on the village signs in both Cottenham and Rampton.

So when Jesus wanted to describe good and evil in an everyday context, he chose an example from his home town, from first century farming. He tells the story of a good farmer who ploughs the field and sows good seed. Then someone comes along at night to ruin the crop. Someone aims to ruin the crop by sowing tares. Tares are weeds. They look very like wheat while they are growing but they are bitter and poisonous. Maybe that person had a grudge against the farmer. Jesus doesn't tell us why.

In 2013 on BBC television there was a reality tv documentary called 'Allotment Wars'. It made excellent television so perhaps it wasn't entirely true! In it some evil gardeners went out at night to ruin other people's prize crops, purely out of spite. They wanted to ruin other people's prize carrots and leeks etc. They aimed to win those 'best produce' competitions unfairly. Maybe human nature has not much changed over the centuries!

In Jesus' parable, the farmer will have to separate out the good wheat from the poisonous tares at some time. It's a lot of extra work. It could be done as the crop is growing but it's best left until harvest time. Then it's easier to see the difference. Then the farmer and servants can burn the tares and save the good wheat.

Jesus does not always explain his parables in detail but in this case he does. In verses 36 to 43 he actually spells it out:

The sower is Jesus, the Son of Man.

The field is the world.

The good seeds are the righteous, the daughters and sons of God's Kingdom.

The tares are children of the Devil.

The enemy is the Devil.

The harvest is God's judgement at the end of the world.

The reapers are angels.

There are two sorts of heat at the end of the story, one bad, one good.

Fire in the Bible had two main meanings: destruction (bad) and purification (good).

The wicked people are destroyed in the fire of judgement, like the tares thrown into the fire at end of harvest.

The righteous people are saved and will shine like the sun in God's Kingdom.

It is one of Jesus' most straightforward stories. Jesus is reassuring his disciples that if they stay true to God, they will be saved.

There's one more very important message. In the parable, the farmer's servants offer to pull up the tares early on. But the farmer tells them to let the wheat and tares grow together. If the servants pull up the tares too early, they risk damaging the wheat too. Many scholars have said that is an instruction from Jesus to his disciples to keep their focus on their current work for the Kingdom. They must leave judgement about other people to God. Jesus says something similar in chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel. There the disciples want to bring down fire from heaven to kill Samaritan villagers who refuse to listen to Jesus. Jesus says: "No, leave them be, we're on our way to Jerusalem".

In today's Bible story, if we think of the tares, the weeds, as wicked people, God leaves them be, lets them get on with doing evil things. It's one of the more challenging aspects of the Bible for many people today. Why does God not instantly solve every problem in the world? Why does God let evil happen?

The answer is not an easy one. The overall message of this parable is about judgement. In the time of Jesus and over other centuries, people took God's judgement very seriously. Quite rightly we usually focus today on the tender love and kindness of Jesus and God. But we also have a responsibility to turn away from doing bad things.

So what can we take from this parable for today?

Firstly, we should not rush to judge other people. People who do bad things today can turn their lives around and be good people tomorrow. Secondly, we may not be able to easily tell the difference between our own good and bad actions. As St Paul says in his letter to the Romans (Rom 7:15): "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do".

That includes all of us. We are all sometimes good wheat, sometimes bad tares. But God gives all of us time to repent, to turn away from evil. God works in the long term, not in the short term to suit human expectations. We too can eventually "shine like the sun in God's Kingdom".

