

Abba, Father: send your Holy Spirit to move among us; to open our hearts; and anoint my lips. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Anyone who is a gardener knows that the battle with weeds is never ending! I have been personally battling a particular tenacious opponent in one of my flower beds for six years now. It commonly goes by the name of 'ground elder', or one of its less common names, 'bishop's weed'.

Introduced by the Romans – yes, it does have medicinal properties – but its voracious growing habits means it wreaks havoc in my flowerbeds. Its roots, hidden away in the soil that cause so much damage, because they are both shallow and deep, interlacing between the roots of my roses, penstemons and fuchsias. The only way to really get rid of them is to lift up the plants and untangle the weeds roots. But even that isn't a very good idea because my plants wouldn't survive such a purging process, and they would still be the odd root left.

No, the ultimate action is to remove the entire plants and the soil. But then I would be left with nothing. But as much as I dislike the struggle with my weeds, the weeds Jesus were talking about were even worse for the farmers: 'bearded darnel', also known as tears or false wheat, was a pretty nasty customer, looked like wheat until the seeds appeared. But like ground elder it grows quickly, taking the nutrients from the wheat, leading to poorer crops: the damage is really going on under the surface.

Worse still, if you happen to eat the seeds, well hallucinations and even death could be the result. The practice of sowing cheat wheat, into a field that belongs to a neighbour, was not an uncommon practice; it was a very good way of ruining your neighbour. So much so the Romans had to outlaw it.

Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of God: a kingdom you would expect to be perfect and without evil. Yet in this story, Jesus is telling

us that things are not that simple. The problem of who is good and who is bad in this world is not as clear as we would wish. And therefore the remedy to the question of evil is not straightforward. Like the roots of the weeds and the wheat intertwined you cannot remove one without harming the other.

The parable of the weeds and the wheat follows on from the parable of the sower. Jesus, as the farmer sows seed on rich fertile soil, which the same story with the same farmer is planting again; this time the wheat is supposed to grow strong and healthy and be fruitful. The implication is that this is about the family of God: believers following Jesus who will one day form the church, but here is a warning: there is opposition, not just outside the church, but also within it.

But how can God allow bad people to be part of his church, I hear you ask? Why would he allow such a thing? Maybe God sends them to test our faith? The issue of evil, and those with evil intentions, sadly seems to be something that is woven into the fabric of humanity. Those who prey on the vulnerabilities of others, is a continual painful reminder of our human fallibility, but how much more painful for us, as the family of God, when we find it within the church?

There are those who prey upon the church from within, seeing its church members as easy targets, but some are less obvious. Continually subverting the work of the Holy Spirit. But just like the inevitability of weeds appearing in our gardens, so too Jesus tells us: will our church never be completely weed-free.

Jesus makes it clear that the bad seed is not his sowing, but there are those who do sow bad seed, and you will know it by the fruit they produce. Acknowledging this reality is the first step towards addressing the problem, for if we deny its existence, we give it the

conditions to grow and the danger of those who encounter it may become disillusioned with the church.

The second step is much more subtle, and makes for uncomfortable reading for those who prefer a world of absolutes. We do not have a solution that is black or white.

The answer is also counter cultural. Jesus makes it clear you cannot just purge the church of all we think is evil. History reminds us of the terrible consequences when the church has done this in the past.

For purging leaves no opportunity for repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption, or grace. It only leaves lives broken and shattered.

No, we are poorly equipped at truly recognising the worth of a human being: only God can really see the secrets of our hearts and judge us fairly. Therefore, as tempting as it is, we must guard ourselves from assuming the moral high ground over our brothers or sisters in Christ, because all of us - all of us - have been weeds at some point. We have all been saved by God's grace.

As Saint Paul reminds us in 1 Timothy, when he stated: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

Whilst we must refrain from judging each other, neither should we allow evil to run rampant, through churches unbridled. Jesus also teaches us and gives us tools for dealing with bad behaviour. This is vital if we're to equip all of our members of the church, who truly seek to follow Jesus, the area - the space - they need to grow in their discipleship.

It is why activities, such as good safeguarding, is a core function of every part of the church, and sits alongside good governance; good management of our finances; our Bible studies; prayer, worship and fellowship. A grace-filled church is never afraid of transparency and accountability as part of its activities.

The emphasis of this parable is on the fruit, because that is actually the only way you tell the real difference between the bad and the good seed. By your fruit, the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

And I know you all know your Bibles well, and that in Galatians 5, we are given a list of the fruits, of love and joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. True love of God will be evidenced by the presence of these fruits in all our lives, and if we're struggling with one of these fruits, and remember we are only human so we probably are, then we need to seek God more, not less, to help us grow in these areas.

These are the fruits that will enable us to grow into a healthy strong church, and in doing so crowd out the weeds. This is the counter cultural way that God calls us to be. My husband reminded me that whilst he would never claim to be a gardener, and my neighbours would testify to this, the secret of growing a good lawn is not weed killer: it's actually growing really healthy strong grass, that will overwhelm the weeds. So let us, by our pursuit of holiness, as true followers of Jesus, force evil out by our love of God, and one another. Amen.