

FARNHAM PARISH CHURCH

Church and Community

Date: Sunday 19 July 2020

Reading: Matthew 13

Theme: The Parable of the Weeds

Well, what a week! Hull City get thrashed by Wigan Athletic. Liverpool are denied their maximum points record by the Gunners. And there's some shenanigans going on in London with two sports stars, a black Mercedes, a video recording and a baby on the back seat. And if that weren't bad enough: the Olympic Games should have been starting next Friday.

Enough of sport ... let's think about gardening. Last week we were looking together at the parable of the sower, earlier in chapter 13 of Matthew's

gospel. We heard stories about John's allotment, his petrol rotavator, and the challenge of the different kinds of soil into which or onto which seed can be sown. Jesus explains in the story that the sower is God himself, sowing generously, the seed is the word of God and the soils and different types of ground are the hearts and minds of people like you and me. John asked us to pause and consider the state of our heart: were we hard-hearted, shallow-hearted, half-hearted or whole-hearted? Really good questions for us to consider.

And maybe you have thought about those things this week. If you haven't (or you missed John's talk last Sunday) you could always check it out again on YouTube and have a think about the question again. Especially in lockdown

and slowly coming out of lockdown it's a good one.

It's easy to think we have all the time in the world to come to a conclusion about these important matters, like we'll get round to thinking about them one day. And that may be fine ... but the parable we are going to look at today suggests that a look at them sooner rather than later might be a good thing. Today we are looking at the parable of the weeds which talks among other things about the day the harvest will come.

Now I am not able to let you know about my allotment. I don't have one and have never had one ... but I do have a son, Josh, who has become really keen on gardening during this lockdown period. And it all started

really with a tomato. Josh had the idea that it must be possible to grow tomatoes from the seeds of tomatoes. So, he took a tomato, cleaned the seeds and planted them in little egg box pots. He was absolutely amazed, and you would be absolutely amazed at how well these little tomato plants are doing. There are loads of them and they are in beautiful rows (Josh is nothing if he is not neat) they are in beautiful rows and are looking very promising indeed.

So far so good ... all this started quite a few weeks ago. And at night when these little plants have to come in, our sitting room looks like a cannabis farm. But that's another story ...

This week Josh is on holiday. And as he was packing, getting ready to go, I

asked him if he would like me to put the tomatoes on the back seat of the car or in the boot! He obviously thought he had misheard, so I said it again. Would he like me to put the tomatoes on the back seat of the car or in the boot? I had figured that if he was going on holiday to the seaside, probably all his little tomatoes might like to go with him so that he could continue to lavish attention on them and water them regularly.

Unsurprisingly, the little tomato plants are still with us, Kathryn and I are doing the watering, the bringing in and taking out, and we talk about “looking after the hamster”, because it feels a bit like that. We just daren't have anything not make it till he gets back. We dare not lose any of these precious little fruits.

Of course, you do know that a tomato is a fruit. This is how we understand the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not serving it in a fruit salad with cream for pudding!

All this is to say, by way of introduction, that the parable of the weeds is about waiting for harvest and about the rather strange way God has designed things so that the weeds and the wheat grow together till then.

Jesus is telling his hearers in the crowd that they need to be patient, but that there will come a time when there is separation of good and bad, of wheat and weeds. That the good guys get to win out; and the bad guys get their

come- uppance. Which is how we instinctively think things ought to be. For Adolf Hitler and Mother Theresa or indeed George Floyd and Derek Chauvin (to quote two names more recently in the news) for them to be judged equally before God just doesn't feel right, does it? So what is this story all about?

It seems that Jesus is saying that until judgement day, the wheat and the weeds will grow together. But at judgement day, there will be a separation. So, we might ask why would that be? How does it work?

To help us understand quite what sort of weed we might be dealing with ... one of the contemporary writers on this chapter says this

The 'weeds' that are sown along with the wheat are described as being zizanion, which is identified as 'darnel', a poisonous grain which looked very similar to wheat as it grew, and could only be separated out with great care from the wheat grain once the crop had been harvested.

Its mixture with wheat was so damaging and dangerous that there was specific Roman legislation setting out the punishments for those who might sow this seed amongst someone's wheat as a way of getting revenge.

Although it is not made explicit in either the parable or its interpretation, which focus on the close proximity between wheat and weed, their similar appearance is a natural part of the

story for Jesus' listeners and Matthew's readers.

In other words, the wheat and the weeds looked very much alike – it was hard to tell which was which just by looking. And although the weed was poisonous and potentially damaging to the whole field, to remove it too soon would be equally, if not more risky still, for the healthy crop. So, they grow together until the time comes for harvest.

Looking very similar is one thing, but if these natural growing things are also symbols of healthy kingdom people (the wheat) and those who seek to do harm to God and his work (the weeds) allowing them to grow together with all the potential difficulties of that does mean that there is a chance not only

for the weed to harm the wheat but also – and maybe more excitingly – for the wheat to affect the weed.

Martin Luther one of the heroes of the Reformation had this to say about this very thing:

Again, this Gospel teaches how we should conduct ourselves toward these heretics and false teachers. We are not to uproot nor destroy them. Here Jesus says publicly let both grow together. We have to do here with God's Word alone; for in this matter he who errs today may find the truth tomorrow. Who knows when the Word of God may touch his heart? But if he be burned at the stake, or otherwise destroyed, it is thereby assured that he can never find the truth; and thus the Word of God is snatched from him, and

he must be lost, who otherwise might have been saved. Hence the Lord says here, that the wheat also will be uprooted if we weed out the tares. That is something awful in the eyes of God and never to be justified.

In other words, let there be time for those who are far from God or not interested in God or who have never heard much about God to have chance to do so. The old prayer book talks about “time for amendment of life”. If that chance is taken away too soon, we might have missed an important opportunity for them to hear about Jesus, repent of their sins and make a decision to follow him.

So where does that leave us?

It leaves us with the idea that the world around us is a place where committed faithful people co-exist with those who are far from God.

It leaves us with the idea that we need, as wheat, to be aware of the potential danger of the weed – we might call this temptation to stray from the path marked out for us, we might call this the enticement and attraction of sin. Whoever said that sin was dull and not in some ways hugely appealing?!

It leaves us with the idea that we have opportunities to make him known and, really interestingly, lockdown is a great time to get conversations going about any number of things:

- what is going on in this global pandemic?

- why does God allow this virus to spread so far and wide and be so frightening and so dangerous?
- what wonderful things have people found to do to look after neighbours or family or friends?
- how much closer have some of us become ... even over Zoom or Facetime or whatever it is we use?
- how much more clean is the air, the rivers and the streets, how beautiful is the bird-song?

Each and any of these is a great conversation starter – often it's our friend or neighbour who starts it first. We don't even need to do that. But in hearing the question we have the chance to speak of God, his love, his compassion, his conviction and concern for the whole world, for us and for those we love, care for and pray for.

Next time I take those little tomato plants in or out I will have rather more to think about. All gardeners among us, please take note too.

Let's pray together ...

God of Mission, who alone brings growth to your Church, send your Holy Spirit to give Vision to our planning, Wisdom to our actions, and Power to our witness.

Help our church to grow in numbers, in spiritual commitment to you, and in service to our local community, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.