The Kingdom of Heaven

Rev’d Peter Balabanski

Pentecost + 8a – Matthew 13 24-30, 36-43

Jesus says The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in their field. One of the most startling things for me about this parable of the weeds among the wheat is that weeds spring up in God’s Kingdom. If I’d thought you could expect anything about God’s Kingdom, it’s that it should be perfect; a place you’d find perfect justice, perfect peace, perfect company; a weed-free world.

This makes me wonder about the ambiguous words Jesus entrusted to his disciples three chapters ago at the start of the Mission Discourse. Depending on which translation you read, he told them to proclaim that the Kingdom of heaven has come near or the Kingdom of heaven is at hand. Mt 10.7b Come near sounds like it’ll arrive soon; but at hand sounds like right here beside us. The two ambiguities seem linked –weeds tolerated in the Kingdom, and the Kingdom at once near, and right here now.

If I look around the world with eyes open to the good will and compassion that come as naturally as breathing to so many, I feel that the Kingdom has come. But if I look with eyes watching for the cut-throat worlds of competition, politics and violence, then I cry out, How long must we wait?! If Jesus has come and died and risen again, how can the Kingdom not have come, complete, finished and flawless?

The Kingdom has come near / is at hand. The fact that this phrase gets translated two different ways may help us understand how the parable can tell of the Kingdom having weeds in it, or, as we heard in last week’s parable of the sower, that the Kingdom can have grain falling on good, bad and indifferent soil.

We're hearing that for some purpose / reason best known to God, the Kingdom is a place where the less-than-perfect is allowed to exist side-by-side with the perfect. My teen-age self would say: Impossible. They can't go together. How can a perfect God tolerate imperfection? Why doesn't God's holiness burn up those impurities as they arrive? How can God know there are weeds and not demand that they're pulled up this instant? They're not what God wants. Weeds are by definition unwanted plants. If God doesn't want something, why does God put up with it?

Who can say? But the strange and wonderful thing is that God does seem to tolerate imperfections. And that's probably why many of us are still here; because God has waited long enough to give us a chance to belong. We can speculate about why. Or better, we can think about what that means for our choices from now on.
The explanation of the parable in verses 36-43 says that we're in God's field. We've been sown in it as children of the Kingdom. We're the good seed. But amongst us, the enemy – the source of evil; the source of death – is planting weeds.

In the growing season, there'll be competition between the weeds and the wheat for moisture, for sunlight, and for nutrition from the soil. So what do we do? If we, the 'sown good seed', take our cue from what wheat does, we'll try to grow as well as we can, and produce as much grain as possible to provide for a hungry world.

I think we're meant to behave like that. Life-giving people behave creatively, productively, positively, simply and generously. It's set out in the Sermon on the Mount – the blueprint for a life-giving life. (Matthew chapters 5-7; well worth memorizing some day) The Sermon on the Mount also happens to tell us about the sorts of things in life to steer clear of. And today's parable illustrates one of those wonderfully; judgement.

The fact that God does much more than just tolerate the weeds is the thing that intrigues me about this parable. For a time at least, the weeds are actually under God's protection. When the slaves ask the Master if they should go out and pull up the weeds, the Master tells them not to. In the Sermon on the Mount, (Mt 7.1) Jesus tells us not to judge. The parable says the same. God tolerates weeds – things outside God's purposes. Who are we to try to correct God's mercy?

Not even angels are allowed to second-guess God's judgment. (v 39) We're told the reapers are angels. They can certainly tell weeds from wheat. But even they aren't allowed to act on that knowledge. The final decision is God's (cf Dt 32.35), and God has given the right to make that judgment solely to Jesus. (Jn 5.22 f) This teaching seems to have left the Church with a very difficult job. Since its earliest times, the Church has lived with the challenge of somehow incorporating weeds among its number; even those who cause little ones to stumble, (Lk 17.2) and yet at the same time protecting the weak from the predations of wolves in sheep's clothing (Mt 7.15)

The parable we've been talking about today says that no-one is to go in and start weeding until the final judgement day – when the harvest is gathered in. If God is patient, and even protective of what the angels recognise as weeds, then that's our calling too.
So we include. We do that believing that if the community of the Sermon on the Mount with its life-giving message of grace and mercy is given its head, it's just possible that, with the Creator's hand in it, an emphasis on nurture and trust might even turn weeds into wheat.

And in our own lives? We grow more through encouragement than punishment. Where an angry word can sting us into planting the very weeds we've been accused of growing, a kind word can encourage us to try life-giving gardening practices we may never have imagined possible. Lord Jesus, grow in us your kindness. Amen