

Preacher: Seng Eng Low 19/7/26 Pentecost 8
Reflection Who is the enemy?

Many of us love gardens and have enjoyed gardening. There is something very invigorating about being out in the fresh air cultivating the soil. Now I live in an apartment, but before this, when I lived in a house, I did have a garden. I used to grow vegetables, tomatoes and cucumbers, zucchini and beans. There was something very satisfying in planting a crop from seed, tending to it and watching it grow, then finally, harvesting it and sharing it with friends and neighbours. Some of you may have also grown vegetables or you may have an ornamental garden with flower beds, trees and shrubs.

But whatever kind of garden you have, one of the chores you would have to do regularly was the weeding. Do you enjoy weeding? How do you tackle the weeding? By hand, with a hoe, with a fork, or using weedkiller to poison the weeds? Pouring boiling water?

I wonder, do any of you just let the weeds grow side by side with the roses and the pansies? Do any of you allow the dandelions to take over the lawn?

In today's gospel reading, Jesus tells a story about a householder who did just that. He had planted good seed in his field, but according to the story, while everyone was asleep, an 'enemy' came and sowed weeds among the wheat. So when the plants grew, the good seed grew into wheat plants but there were also weeds growing among them.

The householder's slaves very naturally asked their master: should we go out and pull up the weeds? If someone offered to pull out the weeds in your garden, what would you say? Go for it! Pull them up immediately!

But the householder's answer is unexpected: he says, let them both grow together. Let the weeds grow together with the wheat. Until harvest time. At harvest time, then I will send in the reapers to gather up the good wheat for my barn and the weeds will be gathered separately to be burned. Now what do you think of that as a gardening practice?

In any case, this story is a parable. It is not really advice about gardening, but a parable about the Kingdom of heaven. When the disciples asked Jesus to explain the parable, he told them that the good seed represented the people of the Kingdom and that the weeds were people planted by the devil. At the end of the age, these will be sorted out, the weeds thrown into the fire and the people of the Kingdom gathered by God.

What did this parable about wheat and weeds mean to Matthew and his community? You have to understand that when Matthew was writing his gospel, his little community of Christ-followers were a new fledgling religion.

And they were split into 2 camps. One group were traditionalists- they were Jewish before they started to follow Jesus and they wanted to still strictly observe the old Jewish laws. The other group, (most likely non-Jews) thought that the old Jewish customs (like circumcision) were irrelevant as long as you followed the teachings of Jesus. Each group thought that they were right and that the other group was wrong. Each one thought that they were the good wheat and the others were the weeds. What do you say? Follow the old Jewish traditions or don't bother with them? You can imagine how people might have had strong opinions about this.

According to the parable, where did the weeds come from? At night, someone came along and sowed the weeds. Who? An 'enemy'! Who is this enemy? In the Bible, another name for Satan is the Adversary or the Enemy. So in other words, the 2 groups of early Christians are thinking like this: if you don't follow my thinking, if you don't belong to my group, then you must be planted by the Enemy, by Satan! If you don't agree with me, then you must be evil! A weed planted by the enemy! And what do you do with weeds? You pull them out and burn them, of course!

But the parable clearly warns against doing this. The householder, to the surprise of his slaves, tells them not to root out the weeds, but to let them grow side by side with the wheat, because in trying to pull out the weeds, the good wheat might also be harmed. At harvest time, the householder will sort it all out himself. In other words, don't take it upon yourself to judge who are the 'weeds' amongst you. Leave that to God.

This tendency to see the world in terms of them and us is common. And the tendency is for us to *demonise* the enemy, to make them out to be all bad, to say that they are the work of the devil, whereas those who are the same as us or think like us are the good guys. We often see things in black and white, don't we?

Now, there was a time, within living memory, when Catholic Christians and Protestant Christians each saw the other as planted by 'the Enemy', isn't that so? Each denomination thought that they were 'true' Christians, and the other denomination were 'false' Christians. Each group considered themselves as the good wheat, and other denomination as the weeds. They were quite prepared to judge the other denomination as being the work of the Evil One.

Fortunately, we have moved beyond those times. As you watched that video of the Pope welcoming Archbishop Sarah to Rome, what did you feel? When you were growing up as a child, did you ever think you would see the day when the Pope in Rome would welcome, the Archbishop of Canterbury, (a woman priest, no less!) so graciously? He even spoke hopefully about making progress towards a 'full communion'. Unbelievable! After centuries of bitter hatred, conflict and even bloodshed, to have the leaders of Catholic and Anglican Churches seeking greater unity 'for the sake of a more fruitful evangelization', is simply wonderful. I have to admit, I found that very moving and so encouraging.

But even as we celebrate this historic reconciliation, it is hard to ignore the fact that this move towards mutual respect and acceptance is quite exceptional in today's world. In a recent survey of American voters, it was found that 16% of Republicans and 20% of Democrats thought that America 'would be better off if people in the other party just died.' They wished their fellow Americans dead, because they voted differently. If they used the language of today's gospel, they might call them 'weeds' fit only for the fire.

And that is only one example of such intolerance. In many countries, people are becoming increasingly polarized in their positions, and violent in their expressions of hatred. Even in Australia, we are seeing increasingly that people are quick to regard themselves as good wheat and at the same time, they see the other side as 'weeds'. The rise of One Nation with its use of exaggerated and extreme language against migrants is one such development. We have also seen the growth of Neo Nazis and anti-Semitism. And especially since the Bondi massacre, Islamophobia has been on the rise and incidents of violence against Muslims have increased. The politics of division seem to rule the day, with our nation's leaders often being willing to use divisive tactics to gain popularity.

Against the background of this increasing polarisation, the parable of the wheat and weeds is a timely reminder. In this parable, Jesus is telling us, 'Don't waste your energy on judging others, on condemning others, on labelling other people 'weeds'. Just leave it up to God. Because at harvest time, in the end, the weeds will become obvious, and God himself will sort it all out. As for us, we just try our best to follow Jesus. We continue to do what we know is good and loving, kind and generous, peaceful and just. And let God be the judge.

Because with our human tendency to have our biases and our blind spots, how do we know that our judgement is always correct, always infallible? Just as Roman Catholics and Protestants in earlier times were equally perfectly convinced that they were right and the other side wrong, might we not also be mistaken in our judgements?

The truth is none of us is perfect. No human is all good or all bad; we are all a mixture of good and bad, isn't that so? The parable of the wheat and the weeds seems at first glance to divide humanity into two categories, the children of the Kingdom and the children of the Evil One. The first group destined to be gathered into the barn, but the other group condemned to end up in the fire. But where is the grace in that?

Perhaps there is another way that we can understand this parable: not that some people are good wheat, worthy to be saved and others are weeds only fit for the fire, but that within the heart of every person, both wheat and weeds grow together. In each one of us, our goodness and virtues exist side by side with our failings and sinfulness. Don't you find that on some days you are capable of great acts of kindness and altruism, and yet on another day, you catch yourself doing things that are not exactly admirable? Weeds growing beside the wheat.

Are we not glad that the patient gardener allows both to grow until the end of time, when all that is good will be gathered into the arms of God, while all that is sinful and broken within us will be purged away by a cleansing fire? And if this the case, who is the enemy who has sown the weeds? Have you not heard the old saying, 'I am my own worst enemy?' We each of us have sown the weeds in our lives and we depend on God's grace to burn them away, that the good seeds within us may not be strangled and overcome.

The Psalm we have read has something to say about this subject. The Psalmist begins by saying that God has searched us and known us. God knows us through and through and even better than we know ourselves. There is a powerful image where God lays siege upon us, hemming us in on every side. And even when we try to flee from God, to run away from his presence and his Spirit, even when we try to hide away in darkness, there is no escape from God, for whom the darkness is as bright as day. God's hand holds us fast.

Then suddenly, in the midst of praising God for knowing him so intimately, the Psalmist changes focus:

(¹⁹ If only you, God, would slay the wicked!

Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!

²⁰ ***They speak of you with evil intent;
your adversaries misuse your name.***

²¹ Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord,
and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?

²² ***I have nothing but hatred for them;
I count them my enemies.***)

Then in the midst of railing against God's enemies, abruptly the Psalmist stops in his tracks and says:

²³ Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.

²⁴ ***See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.***

Perhaps the Psalmist realizes that rather than asking God to destroy the wicked, he would do better to look at himself, to ask God to search him again. Rather than pointing fingers at the enemy over there, help us to recognize if we have hidden faults, right here within our hearts. The Psalmist is willing to be searched, to be honest and vulnerable before God, because he is confident of God's unfailing love. We too can be confident to let God search us, for as Paul tells us in Romans, 'there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.'

So. Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me, try me, search me and search me again. Show me if where there are weeds among the wheat. 'See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting,' Amen.