

A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Romans 8.12-25

Mt.13.24-30, 36-43

+ The Wheat among the Weeds Proper 11 A

Those of you who were in church last week may remember that I asked you then what you *felt* about the parable of the Sower – whether you heard it as a parable of warning (don't be like the hard ground, the stony ground or the weedy ground – make sure you're ready to receive God's message and bear fruit); or, on the other hand, whether you hear it as a parable of promise and hope: (despite all the difficulties and setbacks, there will still be a huge crop in the end from Jesus' message in the world and in our lives). I suggested that there were good reasons for hearing the parable in the second sense, particularly if we believe that we are called to be lesser Sowers, walking in Christ's footsteps and sowing his word in our community.

During this week I took Communion at home to Helen Bunton, well-known to many of us, and I read her today's Gospel, and asked her a similar

question about that: how did she feel about the parable of the wheat and the weeds. 'It's difficult,' she said, 'because of the element of separation at the end.'

And most of us, I dare say, do find that difficult, especially if we concentrate on the second part of the Gospel reading – the bit where Jesus explains the parable to the disciples and speaks in that very frightening language about the weeds being thrown into '*the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*' (Matt.13.42).

Just over a week ago another member of our congregation read out at a meeting a passage from an old book of Rowan Williams called *The Truce of God* a passage that said that no Christian could really take pleasure in the thought of any other person going to hell – and I have to say, in my heart I agreed with that, although I do know that St Augustine in the fourth century tried to justify the idea of hell *aesthetically*, saying that in a finished picture you need both the light areas and the dark areas to make the whole – and hell is the dark area which will set off the glory of heaven. But, you

know, that so-called aesthetic argument just doesn't work for me: does it for you?

So, our feelings about today's parable may be, like Helen's, quite difficult.

Now, there are several observations which can be made about this parable which – even if they don't entirely do away with the difficulties, may set them in some kind of context.

First, there's the fact that some commentators don't actually believe Jesus preached this parable at all; they think that it was the product of preaching in the early church, where Christians sermons may have been developing and expanding the ideas found in the parable of the Sower. And, in particular, early Christian preachers may have been thinking of the difficulties and frustrations the early Christians found in living in a world where they were surrounded by other influences and claims – where evil seemed to flourish in the culture of the Roman Empire, and where the return of Christ which they hoped for seemed to be very delayed. 'Why does the wheat of Christian faith have to grow among so many weeds – the cares, the troubles and the temptations of the

world?', they would ask. 'And in the Church – already there are people who hold different ideas – who are leading others astray...why doesn't God do something about these things?' Well – let's think a bit more about the weeds that some of the Sower's seed fell amongst, says the preacher in response... and then, somehow, that expansion of one of Jesus' images from the parable of the Sower becomes, in itself, another parable, attributed to the Master.

This is how *some* commentators see this story developing...

But, then, others are less radical; they accept that Jesus did preach this parable, and, along with so many others, it does point towards a time when things and people will be shown for what they are, and separated out. But, the rather wooden point-by-point explanation of the parable – the bit where in our reading today we were told Jesus said when he went into the house with his disciples – *that*, they suggest, isn't original to Jesus. Indeed, neither is the similar point by point explanation of the parable of the Sower which we heard last week. Our Lord, they suggest, didn't explain his stories – not even to his closest friends; that would have

been rather like explaining a joke (which is something which nearly always 'kills' it.) The kind of stories Jesus told were meant to mull around in people's heads intriguingly – and either you would 'get it', or you wouldn't... And the point you would 'get', if you got it at all, wouldn't necessarily be a one to one correspondence of every element of the story with some particular truth. The point would be just *that* – a single point, a single realization, that the story would make you wake up to.

Well, let's accept that Jesus did preach the parable, but also that the 'explanation' in the second part of the passage does seem very wooden – 'the one who sows is the Son of Man, the field is the world, the good seed are the children of the kingdom' – and so on and so forth... all this seems a bit heavy handed. So, perhaps we can go with the idea that *this* isn't original to our Lord, such an imaginative and creative story-teller, with such a light touch.. But I can quite imagine how an early Christian preacher might have tried to apply Jesus' intriguing parable point by point to the situation the early Church faced - the questions its members had about the evils

amongst which they lived, and their impatience to see God's reign of righteousness dawn.

But if, in the original Jesus version, there's one main point, surely that point is about the fact that his followers shouldn't be too quick to rush to judgement in the world as we know it – shouldn't be too quick to condemn and exclude; shouldn't be too quick to root up what they consider to be weeds. Patience and trust, even amidst confusion and difficulty, are ultimately the characteristics of true disciples. In the end, it's God who is the judge, not us.

So, ultimately, of course, there *is* the idea that there will be a judgement. That can't be excluded. There's plenty enough in Jesus' teaching about it elsewhere. And surely we all long for justice to be seen in all the earth, as well as mercy, for justice is a good for which the world cries out, day and night. But, ultimately, God's justice is in the realm of mystery, just as heaven is: '*what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him*' (1 Corinthians 2.9). And if heaven is inconceivably mysterious, so is hell, and so is

judgement : all the language of fire and worm, of a throne set and books opened – all this is just as symbolic as the heavenly visions of cities and seas of glass, of an endless feast, and of trees of healing by a flowing river. Language is straining here to hint at something we simply cannot understand now.

We live with mystery about the hereafter, and we live with mystery about the present: why is it some people just don't seem able to believe or respond to God's love; how much are we responsible for what the world or our genes have made us; how far are we free, and how much should we be blamed? Is it the devil, or is it God himself, who allows the mystery of evil to go on flourishing? None of these are questions easily answered. All we can know as Christians is from our own experience –that in following Christ we do discover ourselves to be more free, not less so. In him we find reasons to hope that we can move on, grow and flourish. Transformation of life can happen. This is what we have to offer to the world – a word of hope. And this is the message we have to go on sowing, leaving the mysteries to be mysteries – about why some people take heed, and some positively reject

the message, about what exactly the final outcome will be...

The Bible tells us that there will be judgement and distinctions made, but it also tells us that in the end the whole creation will enjoy the liberty of the children of God, and that he will draw all things to himself. We have to live with this tension and with not fully understanding. But what we can know now, in our heart of hearts, is the confidence Christ has given those of us who believe to come to God intimately as *Abba!* Our dear Father!, and trust him that in the depths of his mystery all shall finally be well. And we can be strongly motivated to share this knowledge with whoever we can.