

Sunday 19 July – Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Sermon by Harold Toms

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

Our Gospel reading this morning is the second of seven well-known parables in Matthew chapter 13, which Jesus introduces with the words "The kingdom of heaven is like" or "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to". The first parable, which was our reading last Sunday, is the parable of the sower, sometimes also called the parable of the soils since it describes four different soil environments into which seed may be sown. Following today's story then there are five parables: verse 31, mustard seed; verse 33, leaven/yeast; verse 44, treasure in a field; verse 45, a pearl of great price; verse 47, the fishing net. Now I've used the word "parable" to describe these stories and what a parable does is it compares a familiar, everyday situation to a deeper, more abstract truth to help listeners easily understand and apply the lesson of that deeper truth. Jesus often taught using this method which was in fact a traditional rabbinical method in which the teacher/rabbi would tell the story and then give an explanation of what it meant. You'll find similar examples both in the Old Testament and in later Jewish literature.

When we considered the parable of the sower at cafe Church last week, people on the table I was on talked about how, at different times in their lives, each of the different types of soil had seemed to apply to them, which I thought was a valuable insight into the story. As we listen to the parable it is tempting to want to think of ourselves as the good and fertile soil into which the seed will take root and from which it will then bear fruit in abundance. But, if we're honest about our lives, sometimes we are more like the path where the seed does not germinate but is gobbled up by the birds. At other times our lives seem more like the rocky ground in which the seed cannot put down proper roots and so withers when the sun comes up. Again, at other times we may be like the seed that fell among thorns which chokes it. I think you would be very lucky if your life is always like the good soil. One of the great beauties of teaching in parables is the way their meaning is not simplistic, the under-lying lesson is not simplistic, they give us pause for thought.

Today's parable concerned the sowing of wheat again. This time the story is quite different. We can consider that all the seed is sown into good, well prepared soil in which it will flourish. The catch is that after the good seed is planted, some-one described as an "enemy" comes in the night and sabotages the wheat field by adding the seed of a weed. The weed that is planted is a pernicious one, "darnel", which will give poisonous seed. The problem is that it is very hard to tell apart from the wheat, initially the plants are almost indistinguishable. The similarity between these two plants is so great that in some regions, darnel is called "false wheat". It bears a close resemblance to wheat until the ear appears. Of course we know that ripe wheat will be golden brown in colour, whereas the ripe darnel will be black. So, sensibly, the farmer tells his workers not to try and uproot the weeds while they are growing when they are hard to tell apart but to wait until they are ripe when the difference is obvious and at the harvest they may be separated.

Again, as with the parable of the soils, it is tempting to simply identify ourself with the wheat, but we should be very careful here. Dividing things into dichotomies is dangerous, dichotomies such as "us versus them", "savage versus civilized", or even "good versus evil" are examples of the ways in which we attempt to distill our world into two realms. When we reduce our worldview to such sharp contrasts, we often lose the ability to see our collective best interests and common goals. Such distinctions often overshadow the shared desire to identify the common good of all and most often result in conflict that can easily escalate into violence. I don't think it would much matter which week I preached this sermon it would not be hard to think of examples that illustrate this point from recent news stories.

The solution to the tendency to divide our world into two is found in this parable. Jesus teaches: "Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn" (Matthew 13:30). The owner of the field understands that once they are together, the weeds and wheat must grow together since the destruction of one can lead to the demise of the other. Likewise, our tendency to split our world into two - "believer or nonbeliever" or "sinners or saints" - is not useful. We are in this world together, whether this world is the planet, our country, our community, or our congregations, we must grow together and

allow the Great Judge, God, to do the separating in God's own time. We should acknowledge that likewise we need each other to survive.

As with the parable of the soils, Jesus provides further explanation to his disciples prompted by them asking him to explain the parable. He tells the disciples: "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels" (Matthew 13:38-39). Given this explanation, the harvest belongs to the Son of Man. We are the fruit of Christ's labour. It is important to recognize that actions have consequences. If one sows hatred and discord that is what one will reap.

God's kingdom is characterised by righteousness, peace, and joy. In order for us to see such a world, we must acknowledge that the causes of sin are not simply our personal struggles, but also our society's ills. The causes of poverty - war, greed, selfishness, are sin. It is not for us to judge one another or to separate ourselves from each other. We must live peaceably and compassionately with all, recognizing that we (the good and the bad) are necessary for each other's survival. Amen.