

“Leave it to the Gardener” a sermon based on Romans 8:12-25 and Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, preached by Dr Mavis Duncanson at Knox Church, Dunedin, New Zealand on 19 July 2020.

Are we genuine followers of Jesus or we pretending to follow?

The scholar Matt Skinner highlights how more than any other gospel, Matthew portrays Jesus asking who are true followers and who are counterfeit; who are authentic and who are fake. In terms of the parable today, who are weeds and who are wheat?

The question is there in the story of the wedding banquet in Matthew 22. People are invited to the wedding banquet and refuse to attend, so the king sends out for others to be invited. These people turn up but there is a man there who is not wearing the proper wedding clothes. The guest has not properly prepared for the invitation he has received. So he's tied up and cast into the darkness. So the question is - who are the properly prepared? It will be revealed at the end, at the time of judgement.

The question is there in the story of the bridesmaids in Matthew 25. Ten bridesmaids await a bridegroom; five have brought enough oil for their lamps for the wait, while another five need to purchase more oil after the arrival is delayed. The five bridesmaids who are prepared for the bridegroom's arrival are rewarded, while the five who are not prepared are disowned. So the question is - who are the bridesmaids that have been prepared? It will be revealed at the end, at the time of judgement.

The question is there in the story of the sheep and goats also in Matthew 25. The shepherd welcomes those who give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, hospitality to the stranger, clothes to the naked, and visit those who are in prison or sick, whereas the righteous say ... when did we ever see you like that? It will be revealed at the end, at the time of judgement.

The question is there in Jesus' criticism of the religious leaders of the time in Matthew 23. They burdened people with oppressive rules and kept people from enjoying the fullness of life that God promised. So who are they, these religious leaders that get it so wrong? It will be revealed at the end, at the time of judgement.

In the meantime, before the end, how can we decide who are wheat and who are weeds?

Is Peter a weed? He must be. He was told he was going to deny Jesus at a crucial moment, so you would think, he would be ready for that moment. But no, the moment came and three times he denied Jesus. And what about all those times he spoke inappropriately, talked too much, acted impulsively, tried to persuade Jesus to avoid suffering, the time Jesus said to him – “Get behind me Satan.” Well, Peter must be a weed. Yet at the end, beyond resurrection, there was Peter, with the risen Christ.

Were the disciples weeds? They must be. They argued among themselves about who was the greatest when the message of Jesus was about servanthood. Although Jesus tried to explain what the reign of God was about, they never quite grasped it. At crucial moments they spoke of faith and following and at other moments they completely misunderstood. And at the critical moment, they fled. Surely they were weeds. Yet at the end, beyond resurrection, there they were, with the risen Christ.

Jesus is questioning our capacity to judge. But he is not questioning our need to discern. This parable does not promote naïve tolerance. There is no pretending here, no sweeping of evil under the rug, no imagining we are a field of niceness with small lapses. This parable takes evil seriously.

As Debie Thomas says, evil is real, noxious and among us. Evil is insidious, intentional, and dangerous. Evil in the parable is not a mistake. It’s not an accident or an unfortunate fluke. The weeds Jesus describes are intentionally sown into the field by a real enemy whose motivations are loveless and sinister. Moreover, the literal weeds are not harmless — they’re poisonous. They mimic the look and colour of nourishing grain, but they’re fake, and their seeds can cause illness and even death if consumed in large quantities.

As Debie says, we are, like the field in the parable, both mixed and messy. Each of us individually, our faith communities corporately, and our world in its entirety, contain wheat and weed, good and evil, the fruitful and the poisonous. We are each at the same time both sinner and saint.

But all that is said in an atmosphere of hope. The parable proclaims and Paul writes in Romans, evil is doomed. In the fullness of time, it will end. Jesus says “At harvest time, I’ll instruct my reapers to collect, bundle, and burn the weeds.” And again: “At the end of the age, the Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Evil is real and evil is doomed.

It is in that fierce hope that we engage as a congregation, among ourselves and with the wider community. Because discernment is tough, it's important we keep conversing around questions of life and theology, practice and behaviour, witness and mission. The deepest longings we share with all humankind and with creation itself find their expression among us, and call forth our discernment.

How can we be the real deal, live as genuine followers of Jesus? How are we to live out the reign of God here and now? How do we help each other live out that reign? How do we express our fundamental identity as children of God? The parable calls for patience - patient hoping, patient praying, patient conversing, patient engaging, patient action. We need to accept the timing of God rather than to be driven by our impatient judgement as if we know what is weed and what is wheat.

Barbara Brown Taylor says bluntly, that the business of discernment is much harder than we think it is: "Turn us loose with a machete and there is no telling what we will chop down and what we will spare." Yes, we can give expression to our identity as children of God, seeking to discern what is of God and what is not of God. And at the same time we can avoid categorising people as weeds or wheat, knowing that is the work of the divine gardener, not our work.

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