

## The weeds within

## Matthew 13.24ff

I used to have a comic when I was a child. Being the revolting child I was, I used to read the Eagle (which was the soul of respectability) at home – but enjoy the Beano and the more down-to-earth comics at my friends. The stuff of comics is people bopping others on the head, or slipping on banana-skins – and in some way or another looking rather foolish - getting one over on authority and so on. Now in adult life I have always referred to the Church Times as my comic. And it is for those reasons, or ones very like them. Dressed up in very much more pretentious format, we have the same - people bopping each other on the head, slipping on ecclesiastical banana-skins, and getting one over on authority.

That is what the church is like, in some respects. It doesn't matter what the issue of the day is. No sooner have some good Christian folk propounded one view, than some other good Christian folk will say how that view marks the end of Christianity. People are unable to live with one another without casting aspersions on their character, their integrity, and indeed their faith. It isn't confined to our church and our country. I remember being at a conference in Germany some years back, and a Swiss Reformed Church lady told me about the Trinity trying to decide on where to go on holiday. The Father said he didn't mind, as he had created everywhere. The Holy Spirit suggested Nazareth, but Jesus didn't want to go there after the way they had treated him before. Jesus suggests going to Rome, to which the Holy Spirit says 'What a good idea, I've never been there.' Such is ecumenism!

Oh dear, even in the General Synod, the churches parliament - with members elected by the wider church, usually from amongst stiff competition - even there we seem to observe tares among the wheat. But then, that will be so wherever we look, if Jesus' parable we heard just now was correct. In the most highly placed, important and eminent circles, as well as at ground level, there will be mixed motives, abuse of power, driving ambition, inordinate pride and so on. And it will be a judgment we all make with our own personal prejudices. What is tare and what is wheat is our decision, in that sense. The trouble with the church today is all these people who don't believe in the verbal inspiration of the Bible, the trouble with the church today is all these people who don't believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, all these people who don't believe in baptismal regeneration, who don't believe in the indissolubility of marriage, in the validity of same-sex relationships, in the indelibility of orders, the ordination of women as bishops etc. But remember, there are also those who say the trouble with the church today are all these people who DO believe in the verbal inspiration of scripture, or the real presence, or baptismal regeneration, or all those other things.

What is an ear of wheat - what is a poisonous weed masquerading as wheat? Let's return to the facts as Jesus puts them forward in the parable. The fact is that they are there. That is Christian realism. Judas was in the middle of the inmost of the in-crowds around Jesus. There were Ananias and Sapphira in the

earliest group of Christians - and throughout Christian history, heretics have lurked among the orthodox, there have been wolves in sheep's clothing at every level. Jesus is utterly realistic about that. The second fact is that according to Jesus they are indistinguishable with 100% accuracy. They are certainly incapable of being got rid of without risk to the good wheat as well. In other words we cannot know, and we have to live with the good and bad.

So this parable carries with it some warnings to us all. We have to beware first of all of the crusading moralists - and there are plenty of those around in various forms, within the Church and without. Get rid of these awful people - lock'em up, flog'em, ban them - in other words, separate them from the good people, Oh yes - it implies that we *can* do what Jesus said that we can't do - decide who is a weed, and who is a flower. If people want to think they know better than Jesus - so be it, but the church ought not to go along with it.

Jesus was prepared to speak out against evil - but he didn't imply we could get rid of evil in that naive way. If that had been possible, presumably we would read in the gospels about his great crusades against immorality, or bureaucratic corruption, or exploitation. We read about him observing and recognising those things existed. But no moral crusades. If that had been a possible solution, he need never have died on the Cross.

We have to beware (secondly) of becoming sectarian. Yes - the world is best mixed - but they don't live in our road - or at least, they don't go to our church. If we can define doctrine closely enough, or prescribe behaviour closely enough, and get rid of those who won't conform to these standards, then we will maintain a pure and undefiled church. Look around at the ecclesiastical structures we have - many of them, particularly at the extreme edges, do this to a very marked degree. Agree with us completely, or get out. Keep our rules, or you're not acceptable. We need to keep ourselves away from the unsaved, the non-members. I am aware of a very distinguished New Testament theologian who was banned from running groups in his home parish because he was thought not to be orthodox enough.

I think of the ways in which I have seen this in its extremes - the people who lived opposite Pippa when she was small, exclusive Brethren who had a double porch on their house, so that the unbelievers would not enter their home and defile it. Or the church in Manchester down the roads from ours that would only deal with Christian firms to provide its paper, repairs etc. Jesus didn't behave like that - and this parable tells us that we cannot either. We are mixed, inextricably with the bad as well as the good. We may not like it, but we have to live with it. Exclusiveness, manning the border posts, is not on for us.

The third warning is in fact to beware of labeling people anyway. The great Lutheran theologian and preacher Helmut Thielicke, in a sermon on this parable, asks the question "Is there anyone whom you can say is absolutely and totally a weed, and nothing but a weed?" The answer is of course No. Think of the holiest person you know, and you can undoubtedly find fault. Think of the most evil person you know, and there will be some redeeming feature. We know from our knowledge of ourselves that we are

capable of being very good and very bad. The same plant exhibits characteristics of Wheat and Tare depending on the light in which you see it. So who dares to say - they are good, they are bad, in those absolute terms? It shouldn't be the church, which is the company of sinners who are saints by virtue of Christ.

So where does this leave us? A few years ago I asked some of our PCC to read a book called "Building with Bananas" - an excellent survey of how we have to cope with the fact that none of us is perfect. The title of the book came from a conversation the authors had with a builder, complaining that half the bricks he had been delivered weren't straight - they curved up at the end like bananas. But with skill, he was able to use them in the wall. Building the community of the church is a matter of building with bananas, they argued, because none of us is perfect. We have to make allowance for that. We don't throw people away for that reason: we make the best use we can...because if we didn't nothing would ever be built.

Let me extend that idea a bit. Think of the oldest structures that you know. There aren't many really old houses. You have to go a long way to find anything that hasn't been extensively rebuilt and restored. But in the north especially, very commonly we can find very old structures which are very old indeed - dry stone walls. They have lasted longer than any similar walls made with beautifully uniform bricks. Yet they are made up of very rough and ready materials. Put together properly, and without any artificial sticky-stuff - they have outlasted the tidiness of bricks and dressed stone. The church is made up of what happens to be around as well. Built well, it will outlast any other organisation - it already has.

Weeds and wheat together - but who knows which is which? No-one, because they are indistinguishable. We have to live in this imperfect world, and any attempt to escape from that by ruthless action will not work, or be destructive. So, sad though it makes me sometimes, I can live with the stories my comic tells me about the awful things that Christians say and do in the name of Christ, knowing that someone else could look at me and say the same. I can live with the imperfections, knowing that if God can, who I am to complain? Let me end with words from Paul's letter to the Colossians

As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.