

Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

Genesis 28.10-19a

This chapter of Matthew's gospel is devoted to parables. The disciples question Jesus as to why he speaks to the crowds in parables. The disciples, Jesus says, know the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven – maybe he's suggesting that he can talk plainly to them. But for the crowds it's different – the message needs to be more subtle, something to give them insight, *if* they are open to it.

In today's story, a farmer has got his workers to sow wheat in a field. Problem was when the wheat sprouted, it wasn't just wheat that came up, but also weeds. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? There are various translations of the word for weeds, but it seems that it was a poisonous grass that resembled wheat. The workers wonder how this has happened – an enemy has done it says the farmer. Should we immediately pull out the weeds then? However, the farmer can see what could happen – that in pulling out the weeds, the wheat might also get pulled out or damaged. No, leave it until harvest time. Then both will be harvested, and the weeds can be separated out and burned.

Jesus leaves the story there and goes on to tell the crowd two more parables that we read next week.

In the second part of our reading, we're told how the disciples asked Jesus in private to explain the parable to them. The sower of the good seed is the Son of Man, the enemy who sowed the weeds is the devil. At the end of time, all causes of sin and all evildoers, the weeds, will be thrown into the fire. And the wheat, the righteous, will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father. But maybe Jesus didn't intend this to be the only meaning, after all it was only in private that he gave this explanation.

So, what are we to make of this parable in our own situation? What do we hear the Spirit saying to the church in this? We could look around a church community (not ours of course!) and see "some committed members with perceptive visions about what the church ought to be", but in the same community those who are "indifferent or apparently motivated by self-interest" (Texts for Preaching, Year A, p 413). Should we get rid of those indifferent, self-interested ones? It'll make the church stronger. And we could look wider than just the church. Our whole society could maybe do with some weeding.

But let's stop and read the parable before we go about our purification. Our first problem is to tell the difference between the wheat and the weeds – between the good and bad

members. Can we be relied on to do this as God would? Or could our weeding likely do more damage?

In Jesus' explanation of the parable there's a phrase it's easy to miss. It's not just the evildoers who are to be destroyed at the end of time, but *all the causes of sin*. Are we to read the parable as not just about good and bad people, but about good and bad forces at work in the world? Good and bad forces co-existing within our own lives even.

In our first reading, we heard the story of Jacob in the desert. Earlier his mother had contrived with him to receive the blessing of his dying father, Isaac – a blessing intended for Esau as the elder son. When Esau finds out he's missed out on the blessing, he is indeed angry and vows to kill Jacob. So, Jacob takes off into the desert. There he dreams of a ladder up to heaven with God's angels going up and down. God makes a promise to Jacob that he will be blessed, and that God will be with him and protect him wherever he goes. When Jacob wakes up he says, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it."

This was a turning point in Jacob's life, though he was still crafty as is shown in later stories. Good and bad are in him, as they are in all of us. Yet God did not cast him out, weed him out. But promised to be with him wherever he went.

We see God's actions with Jacob also in Jesus' actions. He accepted all who wanted to know him. He dined with tax collectors and sinners, we're told. He healed those in need, without checking first if they were worthy. It's not that he didn't condemn evil, but he did it with love and acceptance.

No one parable or story can fully describe the kingdom of heaven. And certainly not this one. Jesus uses a variety of images to show us various aspects. In today's parable I see that evil and evil doers will continue to exist. We do all we can to bring some love and joy into the world, and we should, but it's not for us go weeding!