

Toxic Tares and Troublesome Truth

Last week Ross helped us focus on the opening of Matthew Chapter 13, playing with the parable about the different soil. Today, Jesus' parables take us to the seed as we look at the problem of the bad amongst the good in the world. Jesus does this with a focus on what is commonly called 'Tares' - which lesser gardeners like me, would think of simply as weeds getting in the way of crop. The word is *Zizania* - bearded darnels that apparently look like wheat in its early stages so you can't see the difference.

The important bit is that if it isn't removed before milling, darnel, will destroy the flour as it's both bitter and a toxic tare. That's because it is infected with *Neotyphondium Endophyte* - a cocktail of alkaloids. So if eaten, it would make those who ate it dizzy and sick. And sowing this stuff amongst wheat was a common act of sabotage (See Shakespeare Henry VI; Act 3, Scene 2 41-47).

You may look at today's parable and think, that's easy then, the parable is explained by Jesus. There are good people and there are bad people. I'm a good person, and I believe in Jesus - thank goodness I'm not like those people over there who are different to me.

But hang on. Does that remind you of another story told? I hope it might:
"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'
13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' (Luke 18)

Let's look deeper at today's parable in the gospel: it's not some kind of worldly wisdom of profit and gain. It's not like Jesus' message is 'If your house burns down, the insurance company will pay.' It's more like, 'If you want a crop of wheat, spoil the grain you have and bury it in the field.' Yet again, the message of the gospel is that the spilling of life is to be the very means to the attaining of it.

So often we crave bloody sacrifice or revenge; yet God gives us mercy. The Parable of the Wheat and Weeds means to counsel us against our habit of 'condemning guilt' by learning God's mercy.

Parables consistently introduce a subversion from within into the normal imagination, so as to open out our horizons with respect to who God is. Remember in vv13f of this Chapter Jesus has just said: The reason I speak to them in parables is that *'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.'* ¹⁴*With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. ¹⁵For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn -- and I would heal them.'*

Now, I want to suggest that we are most theologically creative when we dare to let ourselves be interrogated by the problems that have burdened people. I don't see a pastoral crisis of people who say, *'I'm a child of the light. There are so many children of darkness around. I want to weed them out and get rid of them.'*

Such thinking is the fallacy of puritanism. I have said before that I believe we are not called to form an antiseptic sacralised space; not a holy feticish. Rather, being a part of the Jesus community is about the real encounter of the real you with the real Jesus with real people. We must beware the trap of the quest for purity.

What I do hear pastorally, is people wrestling with the knowledge that they are not 'good' enough to stand before the one who is almighty and unbounded goodness. I see people recognise their own division and sin, their failures and their conflicts. And we see a God who creates a school or hospital for sinners, where God works with 'earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us' (2 Cor 4.7).

What we see in the gospels is Christ teaching us to view things, people and events in a new way, different to that which we were used to. Christ preached a kingdom where things are turned upside down, in which the last become first, the sinful woman is preferred to the Pharisee and the thief goes straight to heaven. And we can observe this as a symphonic resonance throughout

the bible. So in Genesis 18 we see Abraham bargain with God about a field mixed with good and bad in his discussion over Sodom and saving it for just a few righteous people. We see Shiprah and Puah in Exodus 2 (1-10) who were Hebrew babies, save the Baby Moses. We see the prophet Habakkuk reminded by God that God will deal with evil. We see Ruth, a Moabite, a foreigner from a hated country, become part of the very lineage of Christ. We see Paul in Romans 7 recognise the battle ongoing within himself 'For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do' (Rom 7.15)

What we need for a 'tasty' reading of Scripture is not to look towards simplistic fundamentalism, but rather our reading must be supported by broad exegesis and lived in prayer. As our Romans reading says, we need to learn to pray in the Spirit so that things work together for good (Rom. 8:26-30). Or as our beautiful closing hymn puts it '*There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea...If our love were but more simple, we should take God at a word; and our lives would be all gladness in the joy of Christ our Lord.*'

What I think we see is that this parable teaches us that we multiply evil when we try to identify evil and weed it out. We really mess things up by trying to take the weeds before the harvest, because we end up taking wheat with it. By trying to remove it we are now doing evil. And perhaps that's the real seeds of evil in the first place, thinking that we truly know good and evil and acting to purge the evil (contrast Genesis 3).

In a world of smoke and mirrors, we no longer trust our judgement to know which is the wheat and which are the toxic tares. We are thrown back on the God whom we trust to have the final say.

And God says "Let both of them grow together until the harvest,". Now it might also help our hearing and understanding to know that the Greek word for "Let" here is the same one that we often translate as "Forgive." Forgive both of them until the harvest. Forgiveness. 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.' 'Let us our sins, as we let those who sin against us.'

So in this place of Let or Forgiveness. We begin to be more generous to those around us whom we don't approve of. And we are confronted by the

Sunday, 19 July 2020

Troublesome Truth - as we are faced with the reality that it isn't a simple puritanism where the 'elect' are good and the 'others' are bad. We come to see the shades of grey within others *and* within ourselves. And within this mist of greyness, of pure wheat and toxic tares - when we are honest about our own need of the God of mercy - only then do we truly begin to understand the message of hope.

As the poet Seamus Heaney put it:

History says, Don't hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetimes
The longed-for tidal wave
of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.
So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
is reachable from here.

The Cure at Troy: version of Sophocles' 'Philoctetes'

This parable reminds us that there is no point in all forms of piety that leave our unimpressive and humdrum real selves behind. It reminds us that the Christian life - our life - has to be one long struggle against all that is in the person that cannot immediately and automatically be brought into harmony with the fundamental, basic decision to accept God's mercy, 'on the far side of revenge'. And that 'a further shore is reachable from here.'

For now, we have to be content with provisional compromise. But to be clear this is not a complacent compromise. But a provisional acceptance - not to tolerate the intolerable (Mt 18.15-20) - but rather to avoid the pitfall of mindset such as the Inquisition; witch hunts; the pogroms against the Jews and all of our attempts to make 'pure' in a world that is far from pure.

The Toxic Tares recall us to the other use of toxicity that our gospel writer, Matthew, makes: that of the spiritual corruption of the Pharisees who thought themselves the holders of purity (see Matthew 3.7; 12.43 & 23.33). Jesus wants us to end the quest for purity which seeks to cast out others. Instead, Jesus urges us to grow together towards the bright fulfilment of God's dream.

Sunday, 19 July 2020

Yes, Jesus encourages us to bring forth the Fruits of the Spirit: Love, Joy, Peace, Forbearance, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-control (Galatians 5.22-23).

This is a Troublesome Truth, that Toxic Tares are in us all and we have to leave it to God to do the weeding - for ourselves and for others - as we live with provisional compromise. Or put simply, we have to love God and love your neighbour, love your enemies and love yourself (See Matthew 5.44-45; Matthew 19.14-24 & Matthew 22.24-40). And when the further shore is reached, on the far side of revenge, we will know the everlasting mystery - and mercy - of our God:

*Finish then thy new creation
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in thee,
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise!*

Toby Wright