

Year A

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The finger was never pointed at Judas and how shocked everyone was when it turned out that the treasurer and Jesus' right hand man was a traitor! And then things really started to fall apart. Their leader was arrested and very quickly afterwards executed as a state criminal. In the course of this, Simon Peter, apparently the most fiercely loyal of the leader's followers denied that he ever knew him. The finger was never pointed at Peter but how shocked the others

were, the way it turned out. And the blows continued. Thomas, who never was a joy to be around anyway, refused to accept that there was any future for the followers of the leader. The rebellion was catching and the fingers started to point as the group of beleaguered followers looked for who next would let everyone else down.

In all likelihood this is the context in which the recording of Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares, as our parable today is best known, emerged. Matthew's Gospel was likely written some time in the 90s AD. This was well after the death of Jesus and at least

a generation beyond the disciples themselves. Nowhere in Matthew's Gospel is Matthew named as the author of the Gospel and so if the date in the 90s AD is correct then we would expect the issues and challenges of the early church at the end of the first century to be revealing themselves strongly in the narrative. The Church has always been vexed, since Judas Iscariot, about the problem of what to do with those who are part of the community of faith who turn out to be false. What do we do with the tares among the wheat?

The bearded darnel is a terrible weed. It was known in biblical times as tares and it has no virtues whatsoever. Its roots intermingle with those of the good plants and suck up the majority of the moisture and goodness from the soil and so it is impossible to pull it out without damaging the good plant. Above the ground both the weed and the good plant look identical until they bear seed. The seeds of the bearded darnel can cause hallucinations or even lead to death.¹

So this is a serious problem which appears to call for a drastic remedy. But the dangers

¹ Bartlett & Brown Taylor eds. 2011 *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 3* p.260 Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press

of drastic action are clear. Any uprooting of the imposters would lead to the whole church being uprooted and destroyed.

What is the Church really like? It's as if a searchlight is being shone upon it this week.

Each week at the meetings of a local Rotary club a different member was asked to give a brief statement about his job. When it was the turn of a Christian minister he stood up and said:

"I'm with a global enterprise. We have branches in every country in the world. We have our representatives in nearly every

parliament and board room on earth. We're into motivation and behaviour alteration.

We run hospitals, feeding stations, crisis pregnancy centres, universities, publishing houses, and nursing homes. We care for our clients from birth to death.

We are into life insurance and fire insurance.

We perform spiritual heart transplants. Our original organiser owns all the real estate on earth plus an assortment of galaxies and constellations. He knows everything and lives everywhere. Our product is free for the asking but there's not enough money to buy it.

Our CEO was born in a wee town, worked as a carpenter, didn't own a home, was misunderstood by his family, hated by enemies, walked on water, was condemned to death without a trial, and arose from the dead—I talk with him everyday.”

An organisation as big and as unusual as that is going to attract all sorts of people with all sorts of motivations. Many of them will be genuine and sound of motive but some will not be and that is the reality of the mixed body that makes up the Church at any time in its history. Jesus told another story recorded in Matthew 25 known

commonly as the parable of the sheep and the goats although in fact the story is not a parable at all. But nevertheless it is about the dividing of the nations in terms of how the faithful treated those who were considered to be the poor. This is a judgement that is exercised ultimately and not in the present. It is this kind of judgement that Jesus in the parable today is referring to as the solution to the problem of the wheat and the tares, the good seed and the weeds. And this is all very difficult. As human beings we don't like loose ends. We don't like living with ambiguity or potential

confusion. We want things to be sorted out now in the present and we just don't want to wait. We are wearied by the uncertainty of it all and by the thought we could be let down by the very people that we have trusted our future with in Christ Jesus.

But this is the way that it is. The Church is not the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven as Matthew wrote. The Church is the body of Christ only in as far as it is consistent with Jesus Christ. It is perfectly able to go astray and there are countless examples of that in its history. The moment we take for granted our calling in Christ is

the moment when we begin to deviate from where we should be. We are then in danger of being led by the tares. And the answer is not to begin witch hunts looking for guilty people in the Church who must be exposed and outed.

John Killinger told about the manager of a minor league baseball team in the USA who was so disgusted with his centre fielder's performance that he ordered him to the dugout and assumed the position himself. The first ball that came into centre field took a bad hop and hit the manager in the mouth. The next one was a high flying ball, which he

lost in the glare of the sun--until it bounced off his forehead. The third was a hard line drive that he charged with outstretched arms; unfortunately, it flew between his hands and smacked his eye. Furious, he ran back to the dugout, grabbed the centre fielder by the uniform, and shouted. 'You idiot! You've got centre field so messed up that even I can't do a thing with it!'

That's the human reaction: to go in and sort out the problem by wedding out the culprit and we end up doing more harm than good. I would like to suggest an alternative. The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 7:15, "I do not

do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate". Isn't that a remarkable thing for the most renowned of all the apostles to the Gentile world to confess? That he was divided in his motivation. That at the heart of his being was a genuine inclination to do the right thing and yet he found himself doing the opposite. Could we say here that Paul identified the wheat and the tares within himself? Just as the disciples, no doubt, began to point the finger at one another, as the whole Jesus' enterprise appeared to be unraveling, until in all honesty the last one realised the finger was

pointing at him too, so the apostle Paul, writing before the final edition of Matthew's Gospel was written down, sees the finger pointing at himself. The wheat and the tares of his own life made up the man in all his complexity. Likewise the wheat and the tares of our own lives are before us as we honestly consider where we are. We all have some mixture of wheat and weed, of that which is holy and that which is unholy, of that which brings hope and that which pulls down. The ultimate judgement sorts all this out but I would strongly suggest that we can all do something about our own condition

without pointing the finger at someone else. Weeds often win out in this life but that is only a temporary state of affairs. Let's endeavour to be on the right side of God's will in this and to do our best to uphold his way as we seek to live together faithfully.