

Our gospel reading is the second of the so-called Kingdom Parables in Matthew 13. Last week we looked at the first one with the parable of the sower – this week we go on to the parable of the wheat and the weeds – or as it is by commonly known – the parable of the wheat and the tares. There are 8 of these kingdom parables, and I shan't say anything about the other 6 – as Angela has those as her text next Sunday!

Actually, you really shouldn't need sermons on either last week's or this week's parables, as Jesus explains them both to his disciples. After telling the parable of the sower, Jesus took his disciples aside and explained it. After the telling of the parable of the wheat and tares the disciples, obviously feeling brave, asked Jesus to explain it and he did. Having said that, perhaps we need some help in understanding Jesus' explanation this morning.

So let's look at the parable itself. We have two lots of seeds being sown – wheat and the weeds. By going back to the original Greek we can discover that the weeds are something called Darnel. Darnel seeds and wheat seeds are almost impossible to tell apart purely by looking at them, and even as they start to grow they look very, very similar. It is not until they bear their fruit, until they are ready to be harvested can you tell them apart, and the seeds of Darnel plant are mildly poisonous – hence the problem. And, to make it worse, Jesus is saying that the wheat and darnel plants grow together, intermingled one with the other. So, what does that mean?

Well, let's look at the explanation that Jesus gives. The two lots of seeds are sown by different people – the wheat, the good seeds, are sown by Jesus, and the darnel, the weeds, are sown by the devil – both, into the field, which is the world. So the seeds growing into plants represent people, and the parable appears to be saying they are either good – sown by Jesus, or bad, sown by the devil, and they stay that way? And actually, it gets worse. Because the parable goes on to say that at harvest – which is at the end of time, the harvesters, the angels, are going to take those people, and separate the good and the bad – people who are only good or bad because of who planted them, and the good are saved for eternity, and the bad are destroyed?

That is not what the Jesus that I know and love taught. The part that we are missing is what happens when the wheat and the weeds grow together. You know, Angela in her talk last week on the parable of the sower, described her efforts to grow some sunflowers from seeds given to her at Christmas by her 18 month old great nephew and how attempt two had been destroyed by muntjac deer eating the plants because Angela had not protected the plants. And yes, if we link together the parable of the sower, and the thistles that can destroy the plants, and the evil that can destroy our faith in a one off action then yes that all ties together.

But here we are talking about a lifelong battle between the forces and influences of good and evil on people, and what the parable of the wheat and the weeds is telling us is we must be aware of those influences as the two types of plant grow together.

I have this picture in my mind of two plants almost intertwined as the stalks wrap around each other, as the seeds start to appear, and the seeds of each are somehow affected by the other, as something of a battle rages between these two plants.

Which all sounds very dramatic, and something of an exercise in symbolism, but how does that relate to us, to you and me, to those people in church today, and those who are not?

The starting point in these kingdom parables is last week's parable of the sower. We are not told proportions, but some fell on the path, and the birds eat it, some on rocky soil and the soil was too thin for it grow properly, some fell among thorns and were choked and some fell on good soil. So we know that a lot of seed fell and didn't survive. Is that not telling us that however much we try to spread the good news of Jesus, a significant proportion of our efforts will not bear fruit.

We are now being told in the parable of the wheat and weeds, that even the seeds that fall on good soil are in danger of being put off by weed seeds. So, of our proportion of people who hear the message of Jesus Christ, that accept that message, we must accept that the devil will attack those people's acceptance of the message.

Which rather brings me to the focus of this sermon. We only have to look around ourselves this morning to see that we are in a battle – a battle, and I don't think this is too dramatic a statement to make, certainly in our area anyway, a battle for survival of Christianity at least through these churches.

And it is a battle that we must fight and win. And perhaps surprisingly I think these two kingdom parables, which can easily be understood as terribly negative stories, give us a real indication of how that battle should be fought.

Whereas the parable of the seeds is suggesting many people will simply not take any notice of the message we try to spread, what it is saying is that some people will take notice – but only if they are in a position to actually listen to that message. What do I mean by that? The answer. Is our soil good enough?

And then the parable of the wheat and weeds is saying that those people who do find the good soil are in danger of being attacked by the devil and that is a reaction that we must expect – and so we need to be in a position to cope with the effects of those attacks. What do I mean by that? Is our weed prevention good enough?

I think I need to move away from these agricultural metaphors, and instead talk about us, here, in these 4 village churches. And I happily do that because, despite what we sometimes quite naturally feel when we look around our churches at empty spaces, I do believe with the right soil and the right weed prevention, we can build our churches – sorry, the agricultural metaphors are too useful – after all Jesus used them.

And that to me is the point.

When Jesus was on this earth he regularly drew the crowds. The largest crowd we hear about is when he fed the 5,000 – include women and children, say, 15,000 people. Jesus' ministry certainly had a magnetic quality about it.

And whilst I am not in any way trying to suggest that there wasn't something special about Jesus which attracted people, what I would suggest is that a Christlike ministry can still attract the

crowds. And to do that we don't need gimmicks, and we don't need to compromise what we believe. We just have to get our message across to what is an increasingly, apparently, hostile audience. Or is it?

What attracted large crowds to Jesus' ministry? Jesus did three things with crowds: He loved them, he met their needs, and he taught them in interesting and practical ways. Let's quickly look at those three things in turn.

Jesus attracted crowds by loving them all.

Jesus loved all people, whatever was going on in their lives, and loved spending time with them. From the gospels, it is obvious that Jesus enjoyed being with those people searching for God far more than with religious leaders. He went to their parties and was called the 'friend of sinners'. How many people would call us that? People could feel that Jesus loved being with them. Even little children wanted to be around him, which speaks volumes about what kind of person he was.

But we consider ourselves to be a friendly church don't we? I think we are – although we must remember that the people who don't agree with that statement aren't here! Is there a danger that we judge people who come to our churches to look? What are they doing here? Jesus would never do that – but neither did he condone what people were doing when it was wrong. He ate with Zacchaeus but also told him to stop swindling people.

Creating an atmosphere in our churches where people want to be here, whether this is the first or the thousand and first time they have set foot in the building, whoever they are, whatever they have done, and making sure they know that we love them, is the first step to creating a Christ-like ministry.

Jesus attracted crowds by meeting people's needs

How many times in the gospels do we come across Jesus meeting someone and saying, words to the effect of, "What can I do for you?" The blind beggar wanted to see again; the centurion wanted his slave to be made well; the woman who had been bleeding for many years wanted it to stop – the list goes on. And Jesus did what they wanted. No conditions attached. He healed 10 lepers and only one turned back to say thank you. Did he withdraw his healing for the other 9? Of course not. Do we know the needs of those people who have no links to the church, no interest in it? Do they have needs that we could, probably initially in a small way, meet, without expecting a payback?

Meeting people's needs is the second step to creating a Christ-like ministry.

Jesus attracted crowds by teaching in a practical, interesting way.

How do we know that? Well the gospel writers tells us.

'The crowds were amazed at his teaching'. Mt 7.

'The crowds were astonished at his teaching'. Mt 27

'The large crowd listened to him with delight'. Mk 12

And how did Jesus teach? Well he talked about their needs, their hurts, their interests. He related his teaching to life. He talked to them about what they knew about – which was the scriptures of the day – our Old Testament, how the teaching of Moses related to their lives at that time – what rules still needed to be followed and what had become outdated, and how following the right rules could improve their lives. And of course he spoke in an interesting style – he used stories, practical examples, to make his point in a way that people could understand. Teaching in a practical, interesting way is the third step to creating a Christ-like ministry.

And of course, that last step brings us back to where we started. A story. A parable. The parable of the wheat and the weeds. But how does what I have just said fit in with that parable? Do you remember that intertwining I talked about between the wheat plant and weed plant. We like to think that we are the wheat plants, the people who believe in Jesus, who commit their lives to following Jesus. But wrapped up in our lives are the lives of all those people who live in our villages who do not yet know Jesus.

I see this parable as the way in which we engage with those people who are not part of our church family yet. We engage with people, as Angela said a few weeks ago, wherever they are. We encourage people to join us on a Sunday morning as we worship our living God – a God who loves everyone. And through that intertwining, we can share that love that God has for us. But remember this building, beautiful and useful as it is, is just a tool to be used, and we can share the love of God anywhere and everywhere.

And that is what Jesus wants, expects, demands us to do – that is what the Kingdom parables, especially those first two, are saying to us this morning. Is our soil good enough for the seeds to grow? Is our weed prevention good enough to protect us from the influences of the devil?

Amen