



## *The new*SHOFAR

Ordinary Sunday 16

Isaiah 44:1-8 Matthew 13:24-43 - Give God a chance!

### **Evil was never in the plan of God – it is a purely human construction**

Here we have Matthew addressing a real problem in his own community, one that is probably an equally real problem for all faith communities. It is a presentation of the problem of evil in the world. If Jesus was victorious on the cross, then why does evil persist? Why do evil people continue to do well and have so much control over what happens in our societies? Why does Satan still seem to have power?

We know these questions from our own personal lives and as well as from within our wider community. Jesus points us in a couple of helpful directions here. The key message is that evil is not something created by God. It is something that is being done from within the world of human beings. It happens because other men and women allow it to happen – note that in the parable the farm workers are all asleep. The more good men and women are silent, the more we will see darnel (evil) being planted in our world. Jesus goes on to encourage us not to be afraid of the weeds. They may be a part of the present reality of our lives but they are not the most significant, most enduring part of it.

### **God will prevail despite the actions of the weeds...and our deafness**

The weeds will be destroyed at the time of the harvest. We should not be spending all of our energies on ridding the Church of evil, or the world of evil. God will do that. We should instead be keeping our focus on strengthening, growing and caring for the wheat among us – the seed of faith that we have received and is growing within us. The more we grow in Christ, the less room there will be for the weeds. The only truly worrying part of this parable is that there are times when the darnel cannot be distinguished from the wheat. Sometimes weeds are accepted by people thinking that they are growing wheat. Alternatively, it is also possible for us to grow weeds when we think we are growing God's wheat. It is only Christ that makes distinguishing them possible.

Is this not a major challenge for our faith communities? We can take up, develop and stick to all kinds of projects and ministries that are special to us but their lack of fruit may well be God's way of saying: *move on. This is not what I want, when I want it and how I want it done.* We can so easily proclaim loudly we are doing God's work and are now getting on with the "business" and awaiting God to implement growth. And all the time God is actually saying, through the lack of fruit, through the lack of growth, through the lack of an active and living response to our ministry – *this is not what I want.* That means we are in danger of growing *darnel* because this ministry has become our own, all about me.

### **Where are you God? Show us your face and your power!**

It is not difficult to understand why it is that people wonder whether or not it is worth believing in God and taking up an active life in the Church community. Despite the wonderful content of its teachings, the world goes on seemingly without challenge. Evil grows stronger and the good grow less and less influential. "Where are you God?" is at times very much a universal cry. How can the preaching of a dead messiah, an apparent Son of God who was betrayed, crucified and buried ever change our world? Jesus was a messiah who

lived so long ago, in a different culture, with a different language and a very different set of historical challenges. Believe it or not, these problems we face today were very much the same problems faced by Matthew's own Church. The expectation was that the Messiah would come with the powers of heaven at his beck and call and overthrow the enemies of Israel. That kind of change they could see, they could feel and could experience. When Jesus came and then died on the cross believers were quite reasonably disappointed.

The point of the parable then taps into our own concerns and experiences. The answer Jesus offers is a mysterious parable. No one (in his time) could explain how a seed grew. It just did. One day that tiny object was planted in ground and immediately a miraculous transformation began to take place – unseen. *By the grace of God* it began to grow. It was all under his divine power and guidance...and so it is with the Kingdom and so it is with the Church's mission. The key point is that it is planted. Growth then happens. It may not be at the speed we would like and in the way we would like and we may well have to stop what we are doing and the way we are doing it and move off in a whole new direction. But in all of this, the call is to believe that God is very much at work transforming the whole of creation according to his plan. Not mine. Not ours. Sometimes we get God's call wrong and if we are closed to new direction and new ministries we may well be closing off the actions of God. God's answer to our question *Where are you God?* is *I am here. You are close but not yet with me.* God is never absent but our self-interests can easily hide the divine presence.

### **Sometimes we find the people of God being the biggest obstacles to the Gospel**

Once again, Jesus comes to our assistance with a deep and clear message of reassurance. It helps to remember that Matthew is writing his Gospel to a Church community that is struggling to make inroads in a world dominated by pagans and the Jews who were resisting this new prophetic movement within Judaism. Not only were they resisting the Christian movement, they were also persecuting and executing the disciples of Christ. It must have been tempting for them to shrink back and work on growing their own faith community first; like a circling of the wagons of faith.

Rather than take on the challenges of missionary and evangelical activity, of collaborating with what God is doing in the world around us, they justify their inactivity by stressing the need to strengthen their own religious foundations first, nurturing their own favourite religious traditions and ministries. In this parable, Jesus is saying the opposite. The woman in the parable does nothing more than take the fermented dough and mix it into the flour. The rest is up to the leaven. So it is with the Kingdom. As disciples of Jesus, our primary task is to live what we believe. It is in our living out of our faith that God is "mixed" into the ingredients of the world in which we live and work. God begins work immediately. We may not always see it and the transformation beginning may not be obvious but it is there. This is the moment where faith and hope offers us comfort. None of our efforts are wasted. Every act of sacrifice we make (that is, every time we choose intentionally to speak and act as Jesus spoke and act) bears fruit. We are the ones chosen by God to plant the seed of Jesus in creation. The rest is up to God. It is God who does the growing. It is God who spreads the Kingdom and the Spirit who opens up the hearts of those who seem to us to be so hardened and closed. Where we are at the moment, is where God wants us to be, and knowing that we fit into this divine plan should be a source of great comfort and reassurance.

### **God works through even the most confused and misguided of disciples**

The good news is that even when we get it wrong and misread what God wants, God's grace will work. That does not mean we persevere in our treasured activities, it just says our own pride and stubbornness will not limit the powers of God. But the *fruits* of the Kingdom will truly flow to those we serve when we are in tune with the divine plan. Only then.