

## Sunday 23 July 2023 (16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter)

*Today we welcome to our pulpit Matthew Rhodes from St John's Ranmoor, a sister church in our mission partnership. He reflects on the parable of the wheat and tares.*

### Readings:

Romans 8.12-25 Matthew 13.24-30,36-43

### Sermon: 'Plants and Weeds'- Matthew Rhodes

It is good to be with you this morning. I bring greetings from everyone at St John's Ranmoor and many congratulations on your Gold Eco Church Award. My wife, Cathy Rhodes, the Diocesan Environment Officer, is particularly delighted to have a gold award in the Diocese. There are now 59 churches in the Diocese registered with Eco Church and we have 22 bronze and silver awards. A lot of that is down to your longstanding commitment to this vital area of mission. The hot weather that we have seen recently in southern Europe has reminded us again of the need for urgent action to combat climate change. As St Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans, the whole creation is groaning in labour pains. We hope and pray for the day when it will be set free from its bondage to decay and find resurrection and new life. And of course we all have a part to play in this as individuals, churches and nations.

St John's has got its silver award and as part of that we've been leaving areas of the grounds unmown. We have been really pleased with the diversity of plants that have appeared, including some bee orchids.

Vicarages are included in the Eco Church scheme so I've been trying to create space for more wild plants. But I do have my limits. When we moved in five years ago I had to clear loads of brambles and holly seedlings. They can take over if you let them so I tend to pull them up. I'm also not a great fan of rosebay willowherb and herb bennet or wood avens. But at this time of the year it's quite difficult to weed in some of our flower beds because they are very full, and the risk is that I will pull up or tread on something I want to keep.

This dilemma is nothing new of course. Jesus talked about it in our Gospel reading. It follows on from the parable of the sower that we heard last week. This time, the problem is not the quality of the ground that the seed falls on but the question of what to do with the weeds that grow up with the wheat. Obviously, this was before the invention of pesticides. When weeds appeared in a field of wheat, the slaves of the householder come to him and suggest that they pull them up. The weeds are taking up space, water and nutrients at the expense of the crop. But the householder tells them not to do this. If they pull up the weeds, he says, they risk pulling up the wheat as well. The time to separate them will be after the harvest.

Jesus doesn't explain all of his parables but he does explain the parable of the sower and this parable. It is often referred to as the parable of the wheat and tares. The son of man is the sower. The good seed are the children of the kingdom. And the weeds are the children of the evil one. And the harvest will be at the end of the age. At the final judgement.

As human beings we have a deep need to separate people out. To put them into categories. We are like the slaves of the householder. We long to get in there and pull up the weeds. To sort everyone out. No matter how liberal or inclusive we are, we all have our blind spots. Our limits. Our brambles and hollies. Our rosebay willowherb or herb bennet. We may be able to love this group of people but we draw the line at that group or that individual.

It is very easy for the media and politicians to prey on that deep human tendency. To separate people out, using phrases like hard working families and benefits cheats. Genuine asylum seekers and illegal migrants. The world is constantly putting people into categories. And we

have seen an interesting example of that this week at Coutts Bank where Nigel Farage has been denied a bank account.

And it was ever thus. Jesus lived in a time and place where there was a strong separation between clean and unclean. Righteous and unrighteous. Jews and Gentiles. Sometimes even he was challenged about his prejudices. Like when the Syro-phoenician woman asked him for help and he said it was not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. But for the most part Jesus was someone who crossed boundaries, who spent time with those on the margins, who welcomed those who were seen as sinners.

As human beings it seems impossible for us to overcome our prejudices. To expand our view. To live alongside those whom we regard as weeds. We tend to stay in our own little bubbles. With people who agree with us. We tend to avoid debate and disagreement. But Jesus calls us to more than this. He calls us to be open. To love our neighbours. When Jesus was asked, Who is my neighbour? He talked not about another Jew but about a Samaritan, the hated enemy of most Jews. A heretic. Someone to be avoided. We are called to love our enemies. Those we profoundly disagree with. Those we would normally cross the road to avoid.

And we cannot do this in our own strength. This is God's work. I love the story in Acts Chapter 10 where Peter has that dream of the sheet coming down from heaven with all the unclean animals on it and he is told to rise and eat. I'm a vegetarian so the I'm less keen on the eating bit. But through this dream God expands Peter's vision of the church and Peter is then able to share the Gospel with Cornelius, a Roman centurion, a Gentile.

Only God can expand our vision and give us the grace to really love our neighbours as ourselves. St Paul reminds us that we are debtors not of the flesh but of the Spirit. We are called to travel beyond flesh, beyond tribalism, beyond fear. To let the Spirit bear witness that we have been adopted as God's children. We are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. And the spirit enables us to share that hope, that welcome and sense of inclusion with others.

A long time ago I was a chaplain in Egypt and most of the people in my congregation were Americans. Some of them like to send me things on social media, including the wonderful words you get on roadside pulpits in the United States. This week, one of them, Susie from Texas, sent me a picture of a sign outside Walnut Grove Baptist Church in Dallas. It says in just a few words what I think I have been trying to say in many more: 'Just love everyone. I'll sort them out later.'

Amen

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