

Sermon Jan Huber on 19 July 2020

Text

Matthew 13:24–43

Sermon

The parable in our text of the Gospel according to Matthew is quite similar to the previous one, which we read last week. Both are about a farmer and his crops, and both are followed by a text in which Jesus explains the meaning of the parable. Last week it was the Parable of the Sower, in which a farmer sows his seed, and the seed either fails in some way, or succeeds; the seed there represents the word of the kingdom, which succeeds or fails according to the circumstances and the attitude of the hearer.

Today's parable is called the Parable of the Weeds. It is again about the farmer tilling his field, but at a slightly later stage: The crop – wheat – has been sown, but an enemy has come and stealthily sown weeds among the crop; apparently weeds that are difficult to distinguish from the true wheat. What to do?

You could imagine that the disciples had been asking questions like: "Lord, you tell us that the Kingdom of Heaven is near; why are there still bad people all around us? Shouldn't we get rid of them here and now?"

Now you know that Jesus usually speaks in parables. "Who is my neighbour?" somebody asks in Luke Chapter 10. And Jesus does not say: "Your neighbour is your fellow man, whom you can help"; no, he begins a story: "*A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.*"

Well, I don't need to tell you the parable of the Good Samaritan. But please notice the enormously more effective way Our Lord teaches by telling a story, rather than by a lifeless, abstract rule.

That is the strength of parables. But the metaphors used in the parables can cause problems too, and this one has caused problems for preachers and interpreters through the ages.

The main question that the parable is addressed to is one Christians of all ages have asked themselves, and asked God. Why does God allow bad people to exist? Why are there hypocrites, heretics, false preachers among us? And from time to time, in particularly fanatic Christian communities, people have even said: "Let us create heaven on earth by eliminating all the wrong people."

Our Lord doesn't think much of this idea. Don't you start the weeding, he says: you might pull out the good with the bad. Leave it to God. He will take care of it on the day of judgment.

That message is perfectly clear. The problem starts when people focus, not on the main message, but on the particular metaphors. In this case, especially the one where the weeds stand for the sons of the evil one, the people who cause sin and break the law, who will be discarded when the Son of Man returns.

Weeds can't help to be weeds; they're not there of their own volition. So does that mean that nothing can be done about bad people, and that they can't avoid being thrown into the fire at the end time?

This particular metaphor fitted very well with the ideas prevalent in pre-modern society; indeed, maybe the text as we have it partly derives from such ideas. People then figured that just as there was good seed and bad seed, so, with people, there was good blood and bad blood. If you came from a good line you would have a good character, you would be fit to rule and deserve a good place in society.

If you came from bad seed, if you were born to the wrong kind of people, or of the wrong race, or of a mixed race – well, society didn't expect anything good of you, and felt entitled to keep you down. This was the normal way of thinking all the way from ancient Israel until maybe the middle of the 20th century. We have decisively left behind us this way of thinking, and we may thank God that we have rejected the idea of heredity as a factor in judging people.

Also, when you come to think about it, this kind of thinking is not really our Lord's way of thinking. Jesus associated with all sorts of undesirable people, undoubtedly also people springing from bad seed. You can see that following up just one of the metaphors in the story instead of the main message can lead you to conclusions Jesus undoubtedly did not intend.

I just said that we, in the 21st century, have rejected the idea of heredity as a way of judging people. But the parable, I found when preparing this sermon, already caused the sort of problems from a very early period. I found an example already in the fourth century AD.

One of the most famous preachers in the history of the church was Saint John Chrysostom. He had such a talent for preaching that he was called Chrysostom, Greek for "Golden Mouth", and he was appointed Archbishop of Constantinople in the year 397 because of this reputation. He had few political skills, however, so he almost immediately antagonized the Byzantine rulers and did not last very long as Archbishop, but many of his sermons have survived until today.

John lived in the time when the doctrines we recite from the Nicene Creed were still being debated and fought over in furious battles, so for him it was clear: The sons of the evil one are the heretics, and he works out the message in those terms. Our Lord does not forbid us, he says, to restrain the heretics, stop their mouths and break up their assemblies – not a very tolerant attitude according to our standards, to be sure – but then he goes on to say: if you take up arms and kill the heretics, he says, it is likely that you will also kill some of the saints, so that is not a good idea.

But John Chrysostom is also uncomfortable with the concept of the weeds. We can see that in the way he deals with the metaphor. He wants to say that heretics should be converted, not killed, and so he blandly asserts something that any farmer could tell him is impossible. Another reason not to kill heretics, he says, is that (I quote) "*it is possible for them to become wheat*". That makes no sense agriculturally, but of course it is much closer to the general message of Our Lord.

Brothers and sisters, Our Lord teaches us that in this world, we have to live with the good and the bad. Sometimes it will not even be easy to distinguish the good from the bad. We may have to reserve our judgment, and in any case we have to trust the Lord to deal with the world. At the end of this parable He describes the terror of the Last Day to warn us, but we have to remember always that He never turns away a sinner. He is the Lord who even on the Cross forgave the criminal.

Thanks be to God