

Sermon – Sunday 23rd July 2023



When I was living in Oxford, one of my favourite places to visit at the weekend was Blenheim Palace. Well, to be completely accurate, I didn't actually visit the palace, but rather the grounds. In those days access to the grounds came for the princely sum of £1, well worth it for the vast acres of parkland available for exploration.

For those of you unfamiliar with Blenheim Palace, the grounds were landscaped by Lancelot "Capability" Brown in the eighteenth century. Unlike the formal gardens which had been popular, Capability Brown made his name by striving for a more natural look, adding features like waterfalls, ponds and parkland. The irony, of course, is that creating the "natural" look was a far from natural process, transporting materials and carrying out hard landscaping in order to convince people that it

was as nature intended. What I loved about Blenheim, though, was that from the grounds, you could just about glimpse the formal gardens, too, and there was something glorious about seeing two very different ideas of beauty: formal and manicured gardens, set alongside landscaping.

I was reminded of this when I saw a social media post recently from the University of Cambridge, showing King's College Cambridge. Since being laid in 1772, the lawn at King's College has been mown meticulously. Until, that is, it was decided in 2020 that a section the size of half a football pitch would be left unmown. If you look at the typed version of the sermon that I have included in this week's mailing, you will see the images of the lawn as it was, and the wild flower meadow that has now taken its place.

Of course our reasoning for allowing wild flowers and indeed weeds to grow now are somewhat different from Capability Brown's intentions. We are increasingly aware that our wildlife is under threat from an increasingly built up environment, and so many of us are learning to recognise the beauty to be found in the more natural environments created by nature – in which insects thrive. Perhaps you have been inspired by movements like "no mow May" to discover just how much wildlife is encouraged by allowing our gardens to be just a little more natural.

Many of you know me well enough by now to know that I am the last person to ask for horticultural hints and tips. So what has all this got to do with this morning's gospel reading?

This morning's parable, often referred to as the parable of the wheat and the tares, is part of a long series of parables being given by Jesus. Last week Jason spoke about the parable of the sower, with which this series begins. Next week, we will hear about some of the briefer parables which also form a part of this extended teaching. The context is important in order to try to make sense of what Jesus is saying.

The parable of the sower sets the scene by reminding us of the world that we live in. Of the challenges that we face as followers of Jesus. As Jason reminded us last week, Jesus was not seeking to criticise people for the ways in which they responded to the Word of God. He was recognising how hard it can be to focus on what really matters. To keep our eyes fixed on the Kingdom in a world in which so many other things can seem more attractive, more desirable. Jesus was intending to inspire his followers to remain focused, not criticise them for finding it difficult.

And he goes on to a series of parables that seeks to explain the nature of the Kingdom that we are looking for. Next week we will hear about some of the ways in which he describes it – a mustard seed; a pearl beyond price and the like. This week, though, we are told about the wheat and the weeds.

I wonder what Jesus is really getting at with this parable. Every time I read it, there seem to be more possibilities; more things that Jesus could be trying to say.

Perhaps it's worth tackling at the outset the thing that I find most difficult about this parable. When Jesus speaks of the end of the age, he describes the way that the wheat and weeds will be separated, with the weeds thrown into the furnace of fire. As someone who believes wholeheartedly in forgiveness, and indeed the possibility that everyone will be saved, descriptions of weeping and gnashing of teeth are painful to my ears.

The thing is, though, Jesus also believed in forgiveness – that’s what he preached consistently and constantly. Jason reminded us last week that when Jesus spoke about the different places that the sower’s seed might land, as a metaphor for the different ways that we might hear – or ignore – God’s word, he probably recognised that at different times in our lives, we are all of those different things. In a similar way, I wonder whether Jesus actually realises that we all have aspects of wheat and aspects of weeds in our lives. We are capable of the most astonishing kindnesses, and also some really rather unpleasant and thoughtless behaviour. So perhaps when he speaks of the end of the age, there is a sense that we will each be purified. Our failings will be redeemed.

It’s also important to remember that the followers of Jesus were living under Roman occupation. There were those who wielded power unscrupulously, and the pressure to simply comply with their wishes rather than do what was right could be tempting. We know only too well what happened to Jesus when he chose the path of love. In such circumstances, some of Jesus’s teaching seeks to make it clear that earthly reward may not lead to heavenly reward, and he gives his message in black and white terms to make the point.

And yet if that is what challenges, there is so much of the parable that makes us think deeply. The slaves assume that their master will want the weeds removed, and yet the master insists that they remain until the harvest. His reasoning is that in uprooting the weeds, the wheat may also be uprooted. It’s such a rich metaphor, with so many possible meanings. If we recognise that we all contain both wheat and weeds, it reminds us perhaps of the ways in which some of our weaknesses are counterbalanced by our strengths. We simply cannot be all things to all people. It may also be a recognition of our need for one another – the good and the bad – in order to thrive and grow.

I wonder, too, whether Jesus knew something that his listeners probably could not even have imagined. That the parable would be relevant in an entirely different way to a new generation. In the twenty-first century, we find ourselves reconsidering and re-examining the whole concept of weeds. And we are doing so for important environmental reasons.

It’s not so very different from the ways in which, across the ages, societies have reconsidered and re-examined notions of right and wrong. Think of attitudes towards slavery as just one example. When the master in the parable warns against removing the weeds, he does so in recognition that judgement is for God and not for us. History demonstrates to us one reason why this is so very important.

And so the invitation of this parable is to keep our attention focused where it should be. On the signs of the Kingdom. Those places where we see kindness and generosity; where strangers are welcomed; where the hungry are fed and the homeless offered shelter. If our attention is there, we may well begin to see both wheat and weeds differently. And in doing so we may begin to see the Kingdom of God more clearly.

Amen