

Sermon Archive 596

Sunday 26 July, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Lesson: Matthew 13: 24-30

A Reflection: An enemy has done this

The Reflecting Pool was overdue, so they said, for a "lick of paint" - not literally, of course, but that's what they literally ended up getting. The new surface was made, again so they said, of a special, extremely tough material, so tough that it wouldn't break even if attacked with a big long knife. To show how tough it was, a motorcade drove across it. Not only was it tough, but because it was seamless, it put a barrier between the water and where the algae grows.

A few days later, when asked by journalists why the algae was back, and why large scraps of the indestructible membrane were floating loose in the green and murky water, it was said it was all the work of vandals, who had sneaked into the heavily monitored area and slit things up with a big, nasty knife. Do we have proof of that? Any video footage? Any witnesses? No, but it's obviously vandalism - look at the damage! An enemy has done this! An enemy of the people. I don't know . . . Does that sound like a conspiracy theory to you?

I'm afraid that this news story had been looming large on my radio, on my TV, in my newsfeed, when I picked up the gospel reading for Sunday 19 July. Someone has planted good seed, but when it grew, weeds were also found to have grown. "Why is this" the people ask. And the Master says "an enemy has done this". Reading the holy scriptures, I groaned, put the reading to one side, made a cup of tea, and wondered whether we might explore a psalm or something else instead.

Twentieth Century Swiss Protestant theologian, Karl Barth, is often credited with the saying: "Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible". The idea is that we read our

scriptures as we live among the current events of our day. The scriptures have something to say to the current events, but how we hear them speaking is affected by the things going on around us. And going on around us, more these days than in the past, is conspiracy theory, suspicion of neighbour, a tendency to blame others, rather than to accept responsibility for one's own mistakes. I guess the question becomes "is there treasure to be found in the story of someone who blames weeds on the enemy?"

My partial recovery began as I noted, in the parable, that in fact the weeds **were** planted by an enemy. There is no conspiracy theory here. The weeds were indeed the result of sabotage. Now, I doubt that invisible knife wielders cut up the reflecting pool. But I know that two French agents came into a New Zealand harbour in 1985 and blew up the Rainbow Warrior. They weren't invited; they came anyway and did their damage. I know that burglars broke into my grandmother's house while she was on holiday, and stole pretty much everything she had. They weren't invited; they came anyway and did their damage. I know that Russia invaded Ukraine. It wasn't invited; it came anyway and did its damage. Karl Barth's newspaper carries many stories of the work of real live enemies who do real damage in the world.

Maybe the first piece of advice from the parable, to a church which attends to listening for the Spirit, is to be honest about the origin of damage. Is the damage due to what **we** have done, or failed to do? If it **is**, then maybe we have a responsibility to acknowledge that, and to set our hands and hearts to remediation. **BUT**, if there is an enemy, then let's be plain about it. If there is spin, lying, hiding, abdicating of responsibility, the prophetic thing is to name it - with the directness of the Master. Do you remember the months after the massacre down the road (and up the road)? We became very attuned to listening for hate speech, for racist remarks - for words that damage. "Don't let the destructive words hang in the air", we said. Challenge them, call them out, describe what they are doing - how they are hurting - how they are speech acts of the enemy. Maybe there's something in the plain way that the Master describes the work of the weed planting saboteur that is helpful to the church - giving us courage for clarity in our social critique.

The parable moves onto the next issue. The issue is: given that weeds are growing, how are we going to manage them? The slaves suggest to

the Master that they be sent out into the field and start yanking the weeds out. Do you remember the reaction of James and John, when the village of the Samaritans refused to receive Jesus? "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" There is sometimes a zeal that's a little too much. Jesus rebuked James and John - and in the parable, the Master says "No; for in gathering the weeds, you would uproot the wheat along with them". However the weeds are to be managed, it must be done in a way that doesn't damage what we are trying to cultivate. It's a high concern (for the Master) to avoid what the strategists call "collateral damage". I mean, imagine sending bombs to disable military targets, but instead destroying a building full of school girls. Highest in the Master's mind is the concern for the preservation of what he has planted. Perhaps that holding back of fire means the weeds appear not to be being taken seriously as a threat, as a negative presence. But that is a temporary concession - oriented entirely around careful strategic concern for the wheat that has been planted and is doing all right.

It might be time now for a pause. Let's have some music for reflection.

Music for Reflection

Lesson: Matthew 13: 36-43

A Reflection: Weeds and people

As soon as they move out of public view, behind some closed doors where they can admit their uncertainty, the disciples say to Jesus "what was that about? Explain it to us, please." He hardly ever explains his parables - preferring just to leave them hanging there - playing with the imagination, the questioning spirit. But for some reason, today he goes into explanation mode. The weeds are not really plants. They are people. And in that lies an important matter for the church to consider - as it manages damage in the world.

A plant grows, I guess, but it tends not to change into a completely different plant. It will always be what it is - a weed. But people can change - can't they? And this parable is about how to manage people. Jesus says the good seed are the children of the kingdom, and the weeds are the children of the evil one. Can the children be changed? If they

can, then the time of mercy for the sake of the good seed (leaving the weeds present for the moment) can become a time of nurturing change in all of the children.

I suppose you've heard the observation that there is no such thing, really, as a "weed". There is only a plant that's not in the right place. There's nothing inherently weedy in its nature. It's simply that it's not where the gardener wants it to be. Move it to the right place, and it's just another one of God's living things.

Thinking about damaging people - and about whether there's anything inherently "of the enemy" - could it be a matter of moving them to a right place (nurture, welcome, company and comfort, education, blessing, health, Spirit) - that's going to cause them no longer to be a weed? The time of mercy becoming a time of nurturing a better placing in the world . . . Do we believe that nurturing works - or at least is worth a try?

We have to admit that Jesus' explanation of the parable proceeds on the basis that weeds are weeds and furnaces are hot, and teeth are made for gnashing. It's presented as the natural way for weeds to be resolved. That's the archetype. But still part of the story is the Master's suspension of judgment for the avoidance of collateral damage - the Master's concern for the preservation of the harvest for which he is hoping. And that concern must surely accommodate for a child of the enemy to blossom into the image of a child of the kingdom. The Master wants to preserve the good.

So there we are. Sometimes there is no enemy - for we ourselves are doing the damage. Then it's a matter of self-examination, confession, contrition, responsibility. And sometimes there IS an enemy, in which case it's a matter of naming that, calling it out, engaging with it. Always, the concern is for the preservation of what the Master is growing, the refusal to create collateral damage. And always, in the time of mercy, there is the hope of growth for all God's children - that the harvest will be good. Could that be our pattern for dealing with damage in the world? Let anyone with ears listen!

And so we keep a moment of quiet.

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