

Pentecost 11
17/07/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 28:10-19a
Psalm 139
Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24 -30, 36-43

The kingdom of heaven is like a field that has both wheat and weeds

A little background helps give the parable bite. And I confess it is getting harder and harder to find commentaries that say what I want them to say, so I will just press on anyway.

The last time I had a chat with Matthew he was concerned about the people in his congregation. It was a synagogue of believers before Christianity became a separate religion, which somehow survived the destructive, punitive Roman expedition of 70 AD (CE), but which, under attack, had become withdrawn, inward looking, judgemental and defensive. Matthew told me he was going to write a book. It would begin with a story about Persian astrologers arriving with more understanding than the locals, and end with the great commission, to go and make disciples of all nations. In between he would put a succession of stories and sayings to blow their horizons wide open, both geographically and conceptually. Jesus' first healing would be a leper, then the Roman centurion's servant, the Gadarene Maniac, and on to the Canaanite woman where Jesus himself has broaden his outlook. There would be some teaching about the poor possessing the kingdom of heaven. And there would be images, parables - "The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind." This parable about wheat and weeds all being in the kingdom is part of that stream.

A parable. How should we approach a parable? As a school boy it was drummed into me that a parable was designed to illustrate one single point. I see that now an example of the rationalism that is very limiting. Once you decided on the point you think your piece of wisdom is right and everyone else is wrong. My problem with rationalism is that it puts a fence around the field in which the seed is sown, it limits reality to that which your mind, my mind, or even the human mind, can grasp and understand.

As a theological student I discovered that there have been a many ways of approaching parables. In the days of persecution, allegorical interpretations were common. Each detail was seen to have a hidden meaning. The two coins the Good Samaritan gave to the innkeeper represented the two kingdoms, one in the world now, another in the world to come. That is the approach that has somehow influenced the explanation given in our reading this morning. "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, The weeds are the children of the evil one, the harvest is the end of the age. The reapers are angels...." I see it as a later addition to the gospel and give it little attention.

In the course of my ministry I attended a seminar in which a New Testament scholar whose name I can't remember, announced, "The parables are time bombs. Jesus had a way of creating an image or telling a story that slipped in under your guard. It caught your interest, entertained you, and sneaked into your unconscious, so that a few days later suddenly, ouch, that image comes to mind in a situation you are dealing with, stretches your understanding. You see you can no longer hold this, and this, or do that." Well, shatter me. That was when the parables got really interesting, explosively so. But I now consider that, with the wisdom of age, I have moved on again, to a contemplative approach. The parables have become seeds sown which grow and branch and provide several productive avenues for prayer.

So -- Jesus tells us the kingdom of heaven is like a field that has both wheat and weeds growing together. Don't try to pull the weeds up or you'll spoil the wheat. Ponder that. Heaven with both wheat and weeds. I used to be in heaven when I got together with a few like-minded mates to pour scorn on everyone who thought differently. The very thing this gospel is trying to overcome. But with that judgemental attitude you even spoil the good seed. What does it do to me to be criticising others all the time? Note, I make the obvious assumption that I am the good seed. Have you noticed, as you move on in life, that it gets harder to say "That is all bad" or "That is all good"? Jacob, speckled character that he was, saw angels going both ways and declared it the gate of heaven. Paul had the problem in Romans 7, the reading two weeks ago. "When I want to do good, evil lies close at hand." Today Paul resolves the issue by saying "All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God". The kingdom of heaven is not really about being right or wrong, it's what you are letting God do in you, bringing some of the good seed in you to bear fruit.

It's not all that easy to tell good plants from bad. Have you ever tried to purge the membership roll or discriminate about a baptism? The Greek text is very specific. The enemy planted zizanium, a plant that actually looks like wheat, its popular name was "spurious wheat". Referring to zizanium emphasises the problem of discrimination. I know an agricultural science teacher, who went to his first appointment. He was sent to a country high school where his accommodation had a nice backyard. So he dug it up and planted a bed of potatoes. The locals got to wondering just how good this bright young man from university really was. So when he went away for the week end, they dug up all the potato seed and planted artichokes instead. An Ag Science graduate should be able to tell the difference! He was amazed how people took an interest in his garden. Everywhere he went he was asked, "How are the potatoes coming on?" "Oh, they've come through beautifully." "They're shooting up nicely now." "They're coming into leaf." It wasn't till the crop reached fence height that he realised that for all his scientific knowledge, he'd been fooled.

So we look expectantly for the kingdom of heaven in a very mixed world. I sit on a tram and wonder about the attractive young lady opposite wearing hijab, or the Indian student next to me studying the Bhagavad Gita on his I-pod. Is the Spirit of God anywhere here? I watched the asylum seeker program "Go back where you came from". Some of the people who were clearly bad seed turned into reasonably good plants. That's what growing bad and good seed together can do. I enter a Dick Smith store and survey the bewildering array of new-fangled electronics. My reaction is "An enemy has done this", though for others it is heaven. Maybe the spirit of God can make use of technology. ('Encounter' on Radio National this morning was about

Marshall McLuhan, and it offered some interesting insights the use of communication technology.) I look to our parliament and see the abuse which passes for debate and pray that some good seed will be sown by someone somehow and soon. They're not all bad. I look in the church and see one side sounding off about another. I started identifying the factions, but it got complicated. I find it difficult to say one group is the good seed and another is the bad, for I see something of the Spirit of God in people of all sides. Izzeldin Abuelaish the Palestinian doctor whose daughters were senselessly killed in an Israeli attack on Gaza city, was told to hate the Jews. "Which ones should I hate?" he asked. "My colleagues, those who helped me through medical school? The ones who teach my children?" I look out on our community here, and I cannot say, "You're a weed" or "You're good grain". Rather I see the struggle with intractable problems going on at the same time as significant worship, supportive fellowship, fine teaching and worthy outreach projects. For us, the kingdom of heaven is to press on with the whole mixture in good spirit, knowing good seed will produce good grain, in the end,

Now for the prayer.

Oh, those poor reapers who have to collect the weeds first and bind them into bundles to be burned. Please, God, don't make me do that! And, please, Lord of the harvest, grant that all I have been and all I am is not bundled up and reduced to ash. Lord Jesus, give me a place, amongst the varied multitude in your barn. And, dear Lord, breathe a good spirit into this community and all the people in your field.

Your kingdom come.
