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# **Wheat and Weeds**

*a sermon on 'radical welcome' for Temple Cowley URC*

Dick Wolff, 17 July 2011

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## Matthew 13 : 24 - 30

*Jesus then told them this story:*

*The kingdom of heaven is like what happened when a farmer scattered good seed in a field. But while everyone was sleeping, an enemy came and scattered weed seeds in the field and then left.*

*When the plants came up and began to ripen, the farmer's servants could see the weeds. The servants came and asked, "Sir, didn't you scatter good seed in your field? Where did these weeds come from?"*

*"An enemy did this," he replied.*

*His servants then asked, "Do you want us to go out and pull up the weeds?"*

*"No!" he answered. "You might also pull up the wheat. Leave the weeds alone until harvest time. Then I'll tell my workers to gather the weeds and tie them up and burn them. But I'll have them store the wheat in my barn."*

So this week we are given a rather disturbing parable, and a strangely relevant one, given that the United Reformed Church is at present preparing to launch a programme in which churches are being invited to commit themselves to offering a 'radical welcome'. The campaign goes under the name 'Zero Intolerance'. The Elders have already given a lot of thought to what it means to offer a 'radical welcome' to people. We have been clear that it's not simply a matter of being nice to poor people, gay and lesbian people, whoever. Being friendly. We have a suspicion that offering a 'radical welcome' to all comers – 'Zero Intolerance' – is probably hard to achieve, and costly.

Last week's parable suggested a *reckless* welcome : be reckless with the way you spread the message of Good News about. A lot of it will produce nothing, but don't worry

about that. Just a few who respond may ‘produce a hundredfold’ for the Kingdom. You never know . . .

But this week we have, in the next parable in the chapter, a more negative image. Some of the seed that falls into good soil springs up strongly – but turns out not to have been good seed sown by the farmer. It is actually the night-time ‘work of Satan’, a rival farmer. It is darnel seed, not wheat. Weeds. Now darnel is, apparently, hard to distinguish from the genuine wheat, so you don’t notice it at first. By the time you realise it is darnel, it’s too late to do anything about it, because by then its root systems are so closely entangled with the wheat you can’t ‘remove the cancer without killing the patient’. Best to wait till ‘the harvest’ has happened (whatever *that* means) and let God (or the judge sitting at his right hand – Jesus) sort out the wheat from the weeds *then*. That’s a message of ‘zero intolerance’ all right . . . tolerate the weeds.

But surely you need to grub the weeds up straight away? What use is it to wait until the ‘harvest time’ (whenever that is)?

Well : Is the darnel actually doing any *harm*, other than using up space? Does it *matter* if it’s left until the harvest?

I think, ‘Yes’. This isn’t just ‘hangers-on’ in the church community, just taking up space (as it were) but not really causing any problems. Matthew describes them as ‘planted by the enemy’. As I tried to think of an example of what he might be talking about, my mind went to an article in a recent edition of *The Tablet* magazine – and international Catholic journal I subscribe to. It described how Catholic congregations in Zimbabwe are having problems with Robert Mugabe’s ZANU-PF informers in their congregations. Their actions lead to priests being harassed and even tortured.

*The Government of Zimbabwe is now treating [the Church] as one of its major internal enemies. Just what that means for ordinary priests ministering to a million or so Catholics is revealed in chilling detail by one of their number who describes how intimidation of celebrants at Mass has become the norm through the presence in their congregations of secret police . . . who report back on their [sermons]. Fr B said, ‘There’s no freedom of speech. . . . the moment you preach that people are hungry those in authority feel attacked. So you are an enemy. . . the moment you finish, things happen.’ This might mean a telephone call telling the priest to come to the police station where he is interrogated. ‘If you are lucky you are interviewed and let go’”*

*Sarah Macdonald in ‘The Tablet’, 25 June 2011, p.4, ‘Fear in the Pulpit’*

Is this the sort of thing Matthew is thinking of? Is he saying, “Yes, there are informers in your midst, planted by Satan to test you, but don’t waste your time trying to root them out. It will do more harm to the congregation than good. (Imagine the culture of suspicion that would infect a congregation). Be patient. The time will come when they are separated out, and it’s not for you to know how and when. For now, you just concentrate on bearing fruit for God.” That’s a radical welcome indeed! A potentially costly welcome – costly, at least, for the priest in that situation.

But then, three pages on in the same magazine, another article suggests another illustration of the weeds amongst the wheat; and very uncomfortable it is – painfully so for the writer of the article :

*Sometimes I look at our wedding photos, tucked away on a shelf in my office at home . . . lately, I’ve been puzzling over those particular pictures that include the priest that married us (and later baptised our son, his namesake, and who was a trusted friend for two decades).*

*For TV viewers, news that Fr Kit Cunningham, there in the album, had confessed at the very end of his life in 2010 to sexually abusing youngsters he taught at a Rosminian school in Tanzania in the 1960s, came on Tuesday evening with the broadcast on BBC1 of a documentary by Olenka Frenkiel.*

*By chance, I had learnt about the dark side of Fr Kit in January of this year. I'd written a fond obituary of him for 'The Guardian' and I wrote as I found. A week later, out of the blue, I received an email. It was from one of the boys, now a professional middle-aged man, who Kit had abused. He labelled him a 'deviated creep'. . . [it all] turned out to be true."*

*Peter Stanford's column in 'The Tablet', 25 June 2011, p.7*

The thing is, Fr Kit Cunningham was a trusted friend to many, and he did a lot of genuinely good work with the poor and needy on the margins of the City of London, for which he was awarded an MBE. Godly Wheat and Satanic Weeds were there in his own life, it seems, inextricably bound up together.

I don't know whether the senior people in this priest's religious order knew about his crimes – and knew that his victims were still around. *Had* they known, *would* they have let him be, as the farmer in the parable lets the darnel be – until Judgment Day? Would they have weeded him out? Or did they think that it would disturb the faithful – shake them to their roots (as it were) – to do so? Did they think it would be better to let the whole crop grow together and let God sort it out?

The signs are clear that they would have let him be. Before he died, the priest confessed. He returned his MBE and wrote letters of apology to his victims. But the Rosminian Order he belonged to organised a memorial service of

thanksgiving for him weeks after his death, in which the truth was not admitted. As the correspondent writes : “It knew the truth, yet it went through a charade that presented Kit as something it knew him not to be.”

Now the victims of a secret service informer tend to be the church leadership, as we heard. But the victims of a child abuser are the most *vulnerable* in the community, and the damage to the victims of sexual abuse continues long after the perpetrator has gone to meet Jesus the Judge in heaven (at the right hand of God). So what does this ‘Zero Intolerance’ mean? Is it to be ‘Zero Intolerance’ of an abusing priest and ‘Zero Tolerance’ of his victims? What does a radical welcome really mean? Welcoming secret police informers? Welcoming abusing priests? Or welcoming the *victims* of their abuse, and listening to the painful stories they have to tell which brings shame on all Christians? (Yes, *all* Christians – including us. There is only one crop, for there is only one farmer.)

I’m being naughty, aren’t I? I’m setting up a false alternative. It’s not a matter of choosing between welcoming the abuser or the abused, is it? Surely radical welcome means welcoming *both* abuser *and* abused, and being bold enough to *tell the truth* (not hide it under the carpet)? Surely it means ‘outing’ the secret service agent, but *welcoming him nonetheless*?

*Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, “Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me . . . It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. So Jesus told him, “What you are about to do, do quickly.” But no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him.*

It's not a matter of living under false pretences : pretending that the crop is all good healthy wheat when we know perfectly well that some of it is good strong healthy *sin*. And nor is it (says the parable) a matter of trying to keep the community pure by continually trying to sniff out the sinners and casting them out. As Jesus said to the lynch mob : "let the one who has no sin in them be the first to throw their stone". No, there is a middle way – but the middle way is not some weak compromise! It is the narrow way, the way along the knife-edge, the most challenging and costly way but potentially the most rewarding. This is the way of radical welcome. It is also the Way of the Cross.

One of the most powerful verses in Scripture for me is in Paul's letter to the Ephesians :

*Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ*

*Ephesians 4 : 15*

Matthew is quite clear in his Gospel : if Jesus is the judge at the right hand of God at the end of time, the Christian community is to act with his authority *in the present*. Twice he says it : "What you bind on earth will be bound in heaven" (Matthew 16 :19 and also 18 : 18). This sifting of the weeds from the wheat begins now – "it all starts now in the Kingdom of Heaven" (as we will sing). But it happens not by the righteous few purging sinners – *that* can wait (says Matthew) for the harvest, whenever that comes. Who is 'righteous' enough? No, it starts with a radical welcome – a welcome that Jesus extended to Roman collaborators and terrorists, plain fishermen and people at the heart of the establishment, and – yes – to one he knew would eventually betray him. *That* is zero intolerance in practice!