



**COTHA SERVICE**  
**Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43**  
**19<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

**Contested Space**

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Minister: Let the words of my mouth  
**All: And the meditations of all our hearts**  
Minister: Be acceptable in your sight  
**All: O Lord, our rock, and our redeemer. Amen**

Deciding who does what at an ecumenical service is quite a task. I'd love to have been a fly on the wall when they planned the Coronation. The Queen has a particular relationship with both the Church of England and the Church of Scotland. So on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1953 the Archbishop of Canterbury gave her a crown whilst the Moderator of the Church of Scotland presented her with a Bible, intoning: Madam – receive the lively oracles of God.

Well, I do recognise that the stakes were not quite so high as the COTHA clergy sat in Barracuda, before Lockdown, dividing up this service. I see from my notes of that lunch that originally, I wasn't down to preach, but the Pandemic has changed many of our plans. Today's text is rather tricky, so I rather wish we'd stuck to plan A!

That's because today's gospel reading isn't a soft story, this Parable of The Weeds. It's a tale that, I think, was always intended to challenge, even shock.

Sometimes we need a jolt in church.

I had a colleague who loved telling the story of his congregation putting on a play, the Sunday before Christmas, of a family opening up their house to a homeless man for a festive meal. The church lights were dimmed, and a spotlight shone onto the stage with everyone loving this warm-hearted presentation. Then the church lights came on, and, ironically, of all days, a homeless man had indeed wondered into the church during the

play and there he was – the challenge, of course, was now in the reality of the moment, who would invite him home for tea? The queue wasn't very long. The Sunday School play had become a real challenge, no longer theoretical but personal. And I think this parable is too.

Jesus spoke of a field where both a good crop and unwelcome weeds grow side by side. It was contested space.

It would be easy to spring to the conclusion that the wholesome wheat represents people of faith, and the poisonous darnel ryegrass, the weeds, or tares, well – those are other people. Before we know it, we frame the parable into a paradigm of 'us and them'. We negatively view 'the other' as bad because that helps define us as 'good'. It can all too easily become the roots of prejudice.

Yet, haven't we learnt that life, our own life, is far more complicated than that. There is 'contested' space in all of us: good and bad, light and darkness. As St Paul says in Romans: *I don't do the good I want to do; instead, I do the evil that I do not want to do.* Those sins of omission and commission creep up on everyone. Both wheat and weeds can grow side by side in anyone's life.

By 1738 the Wesley brothers had returned to England following a time of spiritual searching in the United States. They felt deflated and confused. On the evening of 24<sup>th</sup> May 1738 John Wesley attends a small gathering of Christians in Aldersgate Street in London, writing in his diary that at a quarter to nine he felt his heart 'strangely warmed'. That seems to have been the moment when faith became intensely real and personal to John Wesley.

Because the space in our minds can become contested, because we can all get side tracked and let the weeds grow, we need to hold onto those heartfelt convictions about the love and nature of God. We need to feed and nurture the good growth through prayer, worship, communion, fellowship, and bible reflection. There will probably always be conflicts in our priorities and loyalties, yet day by day, on this Spirit led pilgrimage of faith our prayer is that the wheat gets stronger and the darnel ryegrass begins to shrivel away. We need to have a daily warming of our hearts.

Now, of course, this parable story has more than just a personal application.

The field represents our, or any society. Whether that's AD85, when Matthew's Gospel was probably written, or AD 2020 as we read it. The societies to which we belong, the field in which we find ourselves has wheat and weeds, it's a mixed marketplace of ideas. As Maureen Lipman might have said, there are an awful lot of 'ologies' out there!

Now, interestingly the parable doesn't ask us to go weeding. This story says judgment is God's job not ours. For now, the good crop and the poisonous ryegrass must grow together.

But that doesn't mean we turn a blind eye to the weeds. Instead, in this allegory we name them as being anything that works as the enemy of love.

The parable story calls us away from a Pollyanna type faith in which we look at the world, and perhaps our small corner of it, through such rose tinted spectacles that fail to see the poisonous weeds.

Karl Barth, a giant in the world of 20<sup>th</sup> century theology, used to encourage ministers to preach with *a bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other*. To be aware of the world. To be informed. To always seek to relate faith to the issues of the day and the topics of the hour.

There are weeds in today's society: They have names like racism and nationalism.

St Paul's Cathedral stands in the business sector of London. That Square Mile is home to some of the foremost financial institution of our world. In such a field there's bound to be some good crops alongside some bitter weeds. So, in 2002 the Cathedral formed the St Paul's Institute which: *exists to address the biggest questions facing business, finance and global economics from a Christian ethical perspective including those related to the environment, politics and society.*

So, the Institute is currently discussing such issues as Brexit, Debt, Foodbanks as well as the impact of COVID 19.

This is about the Church engaging and examining. The pre-requisites to either embracing or rejecting what is being grown around us in the field.

This Sunday, in ordinary times, it would have been our joy to welcome worshippers to AFC from both St Michael's and St John's because today's morning service was in the diary as a united one for COTHA.

On such a Sunday it's perhaps worth remembering that word for community so loved by Desmond Tutu: *Ubuntu*. It's an African word that basically means *I am, because we are*. Our lives are bound up with one another, we are growing in this field together, alongside one another. And we need each other.

Maybe the greatest lesson this Pandemic has taught us, or at least reminded us of, is the strength that comes our way from mutual support.

As we grow in the field, we do so alongside each other and I'm grateful for the Catholics, Methodists, Anglicans, URC's and even, dare I say it, the Baptists who are growing around me. In fact, I'm grateful for all those of love and goodwill who are filling this field with a harvest.

That harvest manifests itself in activities such as Messy Church, The Christmas Tree Festival or LunchBreak. It's been apparent in recent days through phone calls, emails and Zoom gatherings. It's been personified by the dedication of frontline workers from NHS staff to the wonderful delivery drivers and refuse collectors.

Ubuntu: I am, because we are.

Today, as we ponder this parable, let us commit ourselves

afresh to grow with love in hearts, always grateful for those beside with whom we share the journey.

May it be so in the name of Jesus: The Lord of the Harvest.  
Amen

*Amersham: 13<sup>th</sup> July 2020*