



Service for Private or Personal Use 19th July 2020

In Psalm 139 we read “I am wonderfully made.”

When we think that there is not much special about ourselves, or try to measure ourselves by what we have accomplished, or feel overwhelmed by the scale of challenges facing us – it is God who made me, a unique individual, to play my part in his kingdom.

When we feel tiny and insignificant in the vastness of the Universe, or the span of our life seems so brief in the millions of years since creation began, or we are lost in the huge crowd of humanity – it is God who made me, a unique individual, to play my part in his kingdom.

When I compare the dreams with which I set out on life’s adventure to what I have achieved, or the person I would wish to be in my best moments is set alongside the reality of what I settle for too easily, or how I shrink back from the heroic stories of some of God’s people – it is God who made me, a unique individual, to play my part in his kingdom.

When, with shame, I recall times of failure – sometimes quite deliberate, sometimes through carelessness and sometimes because I did not ask for God’s help – and wonder whether he can still love me or whether he still has room for me in his kingdom – then I remember that it is God who made me, a unique individual, to play my part in his kingdom. It is God who sent his Son to live and die to rescue sinners.

Now I am ready to worship him!

Hymn *Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim* (H&P 278, StF 340, MP 784)

Prayer

Almighty God, I join with the great company of your people to worship you.

I join with faithful followers from all the ages, who trusted you and sought to serve you.

I join with those I have looked up to, whose teaching, example and encouragement have helped me come to faith and to grow in grace.

I join with Christians across the face of the earth, who in many languages and with very different cultures, lift their hearts to you in wonder, love and praise.

Wonderfully made, we worship you.

Wonderfully loved, we worship you.

Wonderfully redeemed, we worship you.

For those with eyes to see or ears that listen, all creation is your Calling Card. It tells of your faithfulness; it tells of your invitation; it bids us trust the God who can change us. We have found such love, grace and mercy in your Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We have seen the tenderness in his eyes and the warmth of welcome in his nail-pierced hands. A life-transforming power flows into human lives because of his Resurrection.

In deep gratitude and in humble trust I bring my praise today.

Glory be to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Read Psalm 139 verses 1 to 18 and 23, 24

How does the Psalm answer our feelings of inadequacy?

How does it restore our sense that we are of value?

Hymn *Your words to me are life and health* (H&P 482, StF 164)

or Break thou the bread of life (H&P 467, StF 153, MP 64)

Read Matthew chapter 13 verses 24 to 30, and 36 to 43

Earlier in the chapter there is the more familiar 'Parable of the Sower.' Now Jesus tells a similar story, developing the same image but in a different direction. Like the story of the sower, it was a very familiar scene to his hearers. Maybe you have seen a field of ripening wheat, red with poppies; or instead of every stalk standing golden-yellow to the same height, there were conspicuous weeds standing taller and greener than the surrounding wheat.

We have heard both parables many times, and we know the interpretation. Jesus had to explain both parables to his disciples, so perhaps the point wasn't as obvious as we assume. I often wonder if I would get the point if I didn't have Jesus's explanation. His stories were captivating – one example is sufficient: who else could have held his listeners' attention so long that a teenage boy forgot to eat his lunch (John 6 v 9)? Mark tells us that "the common people heard him gladly," and Luke tells us how people marvelled at his wisdom. But the secret was for those who were willing to probe the story, to explore the possibilities of God's kingdom and then respond to the invitation.

Am I willing?

Although the parables stand side by side in Matthew's gospel, they were probably told on different occasions (the chapter is full of parables as if collected together). The details of what the seed and the weeds represent are different: we ought to be careful how we treat details in the parables. Sometimes the details are there just to add colour or authenticity, as for example when the Good Samaritan gave the innkeeper two coins. St Augustine was completely wrong to see those as representing the two sacraments. And what a detail means in one parable may not be the same in another.

God sows, and God harvests

The point of sowing is that there should be a harvest. The seed that is sown determines what the crop will be, though not necessarily how plentiful it will be. If you want roses there is no point sowing beans. When God sows, he knows what he wants to gather at his Harvest Festival.

This time, instead of a sower sowing the good seed of God's Word (and it could be any sower), now God himself is sowing and what he sows is "sons of the kingdom": that's how many versions translate it. I hope I don't need to say that it is not limited to men...

You and I are all planted by God so that we can grow ready for the harvest. We are here to play our part as the Kingdom of God draws near. How? Among the answers the New Testament gives are that we are to be Jesus's witnesses; we are to shine like lights as we hold forth the word of life; we are to bear fruit; we are to make disciples (you can find these in Acts 1 v8, Philippians 2 v15, John 15 v8 and Matthew 28 v18).

When we do God's work in God's way, he is at work. Paul shows the right attitude when he tells the Corinthians that though he may have sown the seed and Apollos watered it, God was the one who gave the growth. God, not Paul, had planted members of the Kingdom there in Corinth. Probably last week you read in Isaiah 55 that God's word will not come back to him fruitless; it will achieve what he intended. Our task is to be faithful; God will cause it to grow.

So what is it that has gone wrong? Why isn't everything perfect? The master in the parable gives the sad answer: **An enemy has done this.**

We all struggle to understand why vandals take such delight in wrecking and spoiling. What others have spent so long creating as a thing of beauty, or as a reminder of some great event or person, they ruin in minutes. An enemy has done this.

A family's harmony is destroyed as one member 'goes off the rails,' or perhaps there is such a clash of ideas they can no longer bear each other's company. An enemy has done this.

A school or a workplace gets a new leader who changes everything and upsets everybody. The loyal and long-serving are elbowed out and confidence is undermined. An enemy has done this.

Somebody at church is insisting on having their own way, and no-one can reason with them. They split the church. Everybody's patience is worn down and the sense of God's love departs. Bullying? Racism? Regrettably, it happens in church. An enemy has done this.

*Instead of thinking of examples and people, recall times when others saw **you** this way. Don't try to defend your words or actions then (even if you were right!), and don't try to blame the other party. Let God take the hurt and the broken relationship, and bring peace and healing.*

There's a problem here. I hurry to make that judgment. I am quick to identify and label 'an enemy.' But what if the trouble is with me, rather than with 'them'? It looks as if that is a vital part of the point of the story. "Don't uproot the weeds," says the master. "Let both grow until harvest."

If I am so sure that I am right I may need to examine my own heart. Am I a true believer, or just a church member? I call Jesus 'Lord' but do I put his teachings into practice? All of them, or just the ones that suit me? Can I claim the blessing promised to those who 'hunger and thirst after righteousness'? I pray 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,' but do I want his will done on the little bit of earth where I am standing?

Groucho Marx said that he would not join any club that would have him as a member! No church is going to be perfect, because it is made up of people like you and me. In New Testament times the church had its Judas Iscariot, its Ananias and Sapphira who proved to be enemies. It had its Euodia and Syntyche (somebody mis-pronounced them Odious and Soon-touchy), and Paul and Barnabas had such a sharp dissension that they went their separate ways. (Acts 5, Philippians 4 and Acts 15 if you want to check) We dare not be confident about identifying someone else as God's enemy – at least, within the fellowship of the church. And even outside the church, the distinctions may be quite blurred. Not everyone ranged against God is a Hitler or Stalin.

That's the point where you may notice I have so far overlooked one important detail. Where were the children of the kingdom sown? Although we love the church and being there, and one evidence that we are actual Christians is that we love the company of God's people (see 1st John 3 v14 and Psalm 16 v3), God sows us *in the world*. "The field is the world," said Jesus in v38. In the Sermon on the Mount he called us 'the salt of the earth' and 'the light of the world.' No wonder there are 'weeds' surrounding the wheat, choking its life.

But one thing this parable cannot tell us is that the field can be a place of hope, of possibility. Weeds cannot be changed, but people can. A life can find a new focus and a fresh aim. Human nature can be changed, in spite of what the doom-mongers allege. Many of the spoil-tips from old collieries have been landscaped into places of beauty. Derelict properties and city-centre bomb-sites have in many places been turned into homes or offices or shops – made useful. And many of life's wrecks and ruins have been so touched by the love of God and the grace of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit that they have become objects of beauty and channels of usefulness. Weeds can't change, but 'weedy' lives can! Praise God! 'Touched by a loving hand, wakened by kindness, Chords that were broken will vibrate once more.'

Only at the end, at the final harvest, will the weeds be removed. Be cautious about the fire and how you interpret it. It is quite conceivable that weeds end up in the fire just because that fits the story; but the detail may not apply exactly to the people. That bonfire owes more to Dante and medieval artists than it does to the New Testament. Rather than obsess about the fire, let us examine ourselves. A sign outside a church read: If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Well, would there? Am I wheat or weed, useful for God's Kingdom or just cluttering the ground?

Prayer

Phrase by phrase, the Lord's Prayer provides a pattern for prayer.

Our Father, who art in heaven: how great the privilege to address you in such words! Who am I, that your own true Son should encourage me to speak like this! I remember those who through faith in Jesus are now my brothers and sisters; who pray the same prayer; who long for the same kingdom.

Hallowed be thy name: as the mention of a name brings to the forefront of my mind the person and the personality, so may the mention of your name draw from me the adoration and reverence that is the only worthy response.

Thy kingdom come: I long to see this world straightened out; to see an end to want and disease; an end to hunger and to suffering; an end to hatred and war. I long to see a world in which Jesus Christ is loved and honoured – for this I pray.

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven: I have been thinking about those choking weeds that mess up your world, and considering how much of my own life and conduct is like that. Hasten the day when all will cheerfully follow your footsteps, will work in perfect harmony to please you in serving others.

Give us this day our daily bread: restrictions have made me more aware of the hardships others endure. What to me have been inconveniences have for some been their regular struggle for existence. Teach me the lesson of contentment in simplicity and in generosity, and heed the cry of those who pray this most urgently.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: how many snares would trip me up, and lead me to betray you. How many times I have failed to live this prayer. How many times I have ignored your answer. Sharpen my sensitivity to all that would lead me astray. And those evils in the world that do not arise from temptation or sin: may there be true deliverance to relieve suffering and sadness.

For thine is the kingdom: may we see your kingly reign established and “the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ.”

And the power and the glory: human organisation and ingenuity have failed miserably to make this a better world. Turn human hearts back to yourself. Instead of proud self-reliance may there be the wisdom of humble dependence on you. Instead of promoting our own interests and importance may we enthrone you in our affections and desires.

Amen. Amen, amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn *Great is thy faithfulness* (H&P 66, StF 51, MP 200)

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all evermore.

Amen.

Bible readings for next Sunday:

Matthew 13: 31 – 33, 44 – 52

Genesis 29: 15 – 28

Psalms 105: 1 – 11, 45b

Romans 8: 26 - 39