

**MATT 13.24-30, 36-43: THE PARABLE OF GOD’S HARVEST (WHEAT AND TARES)**  
[Chelmsford, 23 Sept 2012]

**A TALE OF DIRTY TRICKS**

Have you ever had a dirty trick down on you?

Just last Friday I heard of a doctor who had bought a second-hand Mercedes which he was assured was in fine condition; and then to his dismay discovered it was a clapped-out old banger with an engine about to give up the ghost!

Jesus once told a story about dirty tricks – a story known in church circles as ‘the parable of the wheat and the tares’. “**The kingdom of heaven**”, said Jesus, “**is like this. A man sowed good seed in his field. One night, while everyone was asleep an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away**” (Matt 13.24-25).

Weeds I hate the things – I seem to spend all my spare time weeding.

This year in particular has been a dreadful year for ground elder – this ground-elder is ruining my flower-beds.

However, in Palestine it wasn’t ground elder or bine weed which was the biggest nuisance, but ‘*bearded darnel*’. Bearded darnel – or *lolium temulentum* to give it its Latin name - was poisonous and an absolute killer.

What made things worse was that this bearded darnel was well-nigh indistinguishable from wheat until the ears began to show. But by then it was too late to do anything, for these weeds had become so intertwined with the wheat that they couldn’t be uprooted without damage being done to the wheat.

This was the stuff that some lousy fellow sowed in his neighbour’s field.

It may sound an unlikely story, but in fact it was a well-known form of agricultural sabotage in the ancient world; there was even a Roman law dealing specifically with the crime of sowing darnel in a wheat field.

Like so many of his parables, this story was almost certainly based on a true incident.

This was the latest dirty trick in Galilee.

Jesus used this dirty trick, this real-life situation, to teach spiritual truth.

What was this spiritual truth?

- Some have suggested that Jesus was calling for tolerance – as if he were saying ‘*Let the weeds alone*’. This certainly was the traditional interpretation of the parable. Interpreters assumed that Jesus was speaking of the church; and that he was warning some of his more enthusiastic followers not to be too zealous in sorting out the sheep from the goats, or in this case the weeds from the wheat. That was God’s job, not theirs. Rather they were to take a more relaxed attitude to church and accept that the church would always be a mixed body; that there would always be sinners rubbing shoulders with saints.
- But that is a misinterpretation. Jesus is calling here not for tolerance, but rather for patience. Jesus is here speaking not about the church, but about the world. Indeed,

Jesus declares in v38: **“the field is the world”**. In this world there are two forces at work: there is a force for good and a force for evil; there is God and his Kingdom on the one hand, and Satan and his kingdom on the other.

When Jesus spoke of the power of the Kingdom, he had in mind the power of God let loose in the world through his preaching and through his healing activity – through his ministry men and women were experiencing the blessings of God’s rule in their lives. But a contrary force had been set in motion. Weeds as well as wheat were being sown. The enemy through his agents was trying to ruin the work of God through trying to destroy the harvest in advance.

Remember, Jesus was telling his parable to people at a particular moment in time. In the first place he was talking about his immediate situation. He was almost certainly referring to the attacks upon him by the religious leaders of his day; perhaps too he was referring to Herod’s silencing of John the Baptist. Jesus was very conscious of the pressures upon him. But he declared that there was a harvest day coming, when the wheat would be sorted from the weeds. In the meantime, says Jesus to his disciples, be patient, have faith in God.

Today that call to patience is directed to you and me. Let’s be honest, at times it can be depressing to see how successful the Devil seems to be. In our nation the forces of secularisation seem to have the upper hand. In so many areas of public life the rot seems to have set in. Greed and corruption are there for all to see. So too are lax sexual morals – anything now goes. Yes, the forces of evil are having a field day. But cheer-up, says Jesus, the day is coming when God will have the last word, when the harvest is brought home and the weeds are destroyed. Be patient – the fact is that already in the here and now God is at work through his church – he is winning men and women for himself. One day all will become clear. And then, God will be supreme.

This then is the message of the parable. The day is coming when God will bring in his harvest – and on that day the weeds will be destroyed.

On this Harvest Sunday I want us to look at three aspects of the harvest that is to come.

## **1. THE INEVITABILITY OF JUDGMENT**

Jesus says: **“The Son of Man will send out his angels to gather up out of his Kingdom all those who cause people to sin and all others who do evil things”** (v41)

This is a simple statement of fact. Judgement is inevitable. Do notice, that there is all the difference in the world between Jesus and a weather forecaster.

Weather forecasters are never quite sure about future weather patterns – sometimes they are right, but not always so.

But Jesus here is not engaging in speculation – this is not a well-informed hunch

Jesus is solemnly declaring that there will be a day when the wheat is gathered in and the weeds are destroyed.

There will be a day, when “**the people who belong to the Kingdom**” will be separated from “**the people who belong to the Evil One**” (v38).

Stephen Travis, a distinguished New Testament scholar who was one year below me at my old Cambridge college, has written: “*No theme is so prominent in the Bible and so neglected by Christians today as the theme of judgement*”

Time and again people have sought to reject this particular piece of Christian teaching.

They just do not feel comfortable with it.

But what right have we to reject this teaching?

What right have we to presume ourselves better informed on ultimate issues than Jesus?

The fact is that Jesus warned time and again about the inevitability of judgement.

In this respect Dr Samuel Johnson, celebrated for his great *Dictionary of the English Language*, had some wise words to say: “*I remember that my Maker has said that he will place the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. That is a solemn truth which this frivolous age needs to hear, for it strikes at the very roots of life and destiny*”.

If that was true in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it is even more true today.

Here is something which our “*frivolous*” age needs to hear: one day all of us will have to give an account of ourselves to our Maker. Judgement is inevitable.

This is not just a Biblical truth – it is also a logical truth.

Judgement is a consequence of the kind of world we live in.

For all of us are endowed with conscience – all of have are capable of distinguishing, in part at least, between good and evil.

In this moral universe judgment is only to be expected

There will be a day when there will be a separation of the weeds from the wheat.

## 2. THE NATURE OF JUDGMENT

But there will be more than a separation. Listen carefully to Jesus: “**The Son of Man will send out his angels to gather up out of his Kingdom all those who cause people to sin and all others who do evil things, and they will throw them into the fiery furnace, where they will cry and grind their teeth. Then God’s people will shine like the sun in their Father’s kingdom**” (41-43).

Clearly Jesus is using picture language:

- the fiery furnace derives from the imagery of the incineration of unwanted vegetation;

- the crying and grinding of teeth is imagery routinely used by Jesus to describe the devastation of the damned once they realise they have been excluded from the heavenly banquet
- the shining of God's people like the sun is imagery drawn from the prophet Daniel.

But the fact that we are dealing with picture language, does not mean that heaven and hell are on the same plane as Father Christmas and his grotto.

The picture language is a vehicle for conveying truth,

Jesus was speaking of reality – or rather of two realities: the reality of heaven and the reality of heaven.

For the most part people do not have difficulty in accepting the idea of heaven.

But many people, including even some Christians, have difficulty in accepting the idea of hell.

In part perhaps this is because of preachers in the past who preached a crude version of Hell.

One old Scottish preacher, for instance, when speaking to children would tear off a slip of paper from his notes, hold it to a candle, and inform the children that their fingers would likewise burn if they did not behave themselves.

Today we rightly reject such crudities

People will not be literally burnt in a fiery furnace.

Nor will there literally be crying and grinding of teeth.

And yet we cannot just dismiss the imagery: for the imagery is telling us that whatever hell may be, it will be something unspeakable horrid.

To put it mildly, hell is too awful contemplate

To think of people going to hell gives no Christian any joy – but neither does it give any joy to God. God is no cosmic sadist, who delights to see people suffer.

God is no dirty trickster – rather God wants the very best for us.

As the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy “**God wants everybody to be saved**” (1 Tim 2.4)

That is why God sent Jesus into the world. In the words of John 3.16: “**God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life**”. John goes on: “**For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its saviour**” (John 3.17)

The good news is that Jesus on the Cross went through hell for us that we might be share life with God in his Kingdom.

The fact is that God sends nobody to hell - it is we who send ourselves.

CS Lewis put it this way: “*In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question: ‘What are you asking God to do?’ To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But he has done so, on Calvary? To forgive them? They will not be forgiven! To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that this is what He does.*”

### 3. THE CRITERION OF JUDGEMENT

On what basis does God sift the wheat from the weeds?

At first sight the parable seems fatalistic: good seed is sown by the Son of Man, and bad seed is sown by the Devil. It appears as though there is nothing we can do about it – our fate is decided by some higher power.

But this is not the case. Our destiny lies within our own hands. For Jesus concludes the parable with these words: “**Listen then, if you have ears**” (v43). Or to quote Peterson’s paraphrase: “*Are you listening to this? Are you really listening?*” The implication is that we can do something about our destiny. As Jesus makes clear elsewhere, our future destiny revolves around our listening to him. The judgement to come will centre around how we have responded to Jesus.

There is a clear challenge present here  
Will we follow Jesus or will we not?  
Will we turn away from our self-centredness and put our trust in him, or will we stay as we are?

Yes, it will be our response to Jesus which will form the basis for the judgement to come. The judgement will not depend on what we have achieved in life – for nothing that we have done in this world will ever match up to God’s demanding standards. Judgement will be dependent upon our response to Jesus’ call to follow him. And when it comes to Jesus’ call to follow him, the invitation is to all. “**I have not come to call respectable people**”, said Jesus, “**but outcasts**” (Matt 9.13) Yes, amazing as it may seem, our eternal destiny depends not on how good we are – but rather on whether or not we have sought to follow Jesus.

This is the good news we have to share this morning  
This is the good news that our friends in Lebanon want to share through their bus project.  
Jesus – he is the Saviour of the world!  
The only thing in question is whether he is your Saviour and mine.  
On the day when the harvest is brought in, will you be among the wheat or among the weeds?

Let me encourage you this morning to listen to Jesus – to listen to his invitation of love and life. Many years ago I opened the door of my heart to Jesus – I invited him to be my Saviour & my Lord. For eternity’s sake, let me encourage you to do the same.

Lord Jesus, in many ways this is a grim parable – for it speaks of the certainty of doom and judgement. And yet it also speaks of the certainty of hope and of heaven for those who entrust their lives to you. Lord Jesus, you gave your life for me that I might be forgiven, that I might know life which has no end. In turn I would give my life to you – yes, come into my heart and be my Saviour and my Lord. Thank you the security your love has given me.