

Sermon preached at Soham on 23rd July – Proper 11
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

My vegetable garden has not been particularly successful this year. There's nothing wrong with the vegetables growing in it – other than the marrow plants, which all got eaten within hours of being planted out – but the problem is that there are not many vegetables growing in it. There's a whole big patch which I never got round to planting. So that patch, where the sweetcorn should've been, has done a good line in growing weeds. I don't know what it was that came up because, strangely, it was the same plant that grew all over the patch. But whatever it was, it grew vigorously, covered the bare patch, and then spread sideways to my onion patch and grew in amongst them.

Now, I'm not the best gardener, but even I could tell the difference between these weeds, whatever they were, and the onions. Although they were all about the same height by the time I got to tackling them, they looked very different. But even then, as I merrily pulled up weed after weed after weed, extricating them from the little onion plants, I suddenly discovered that I'd pulled up a baby onion too. Not because I couldn't tell the difference, but because the onion was growing through the midst of the weed, and in pulling up one, the other had come too.

The added difficulty in the story Jesus told was that the weed in question, which had been sown in amongst the wheat, was a weed that looks almost identical to wheat until not long before harvest. It's only when the two plants are coming to maturity that they are distinguishable from each other. Up until then, at the point when it would've been possible to separate them out, you just can't tell which is which. By the time you can tell, pulling up one will also uproot the other.

In this parable about God's Kingdom, then, Jesus shows us one of the difficulties with the Kingdom: it's not usually easy to tell who's in and who's out. Whether or not people have a relationship with God is very difficult to judge. Thankfully, we don't have to – and we shouldn't be trying to. That's God's role, not ours.

He also shows us the organic nature of the Kingdom – that it involves growth, and time. Only as the plants grow and come to maturity can they be distinguished from each other; until then, who knows what the outcome might be? There was a similar thread in last Sunday's reading, the Parable of the Sower: the sower sows plenty of seed, but at the time of sowing there's no telling which seeds will be eaten by birds, which will never grow, which will grow and then wither, which will be choked by weeds, and which will flourish. Only time will tell. People's relationships with God are not something which we can assess, or manipulate, or hurry.

If God's Kingdom grows in such an organic way, then perhaps that takes some pressure off us. Perhaps the number of people attending each church event isn't that important as a measure of what's going on. Perhaps it doesn't matter whether people are here because they have a particular set of beliefs, or whether they are here looking for somewhere to belong, with the beliefs maybe coming later. Perhaps, if the person in the pew next to you, or behind you, has a different take on faith to yours, that's not an indication of their heresy – or yours! – which needs to be argued with and tackled, but of how your faith journeys have differed.

On the other hand, we do have some responsibility. Plants which don't receive proper nutrition won't grow properly, if at all. Plants need to be fed and watered. They need to be protected from predators. They need to be nurtured. Whether or not people have a relationship with God is very difficult – and not our role – to judge; but we do have a role in nurturing those relationships.

So what opportunities do we provide for people to grow and deepen their relationship with God? In what ways do we, as individuals, and collectively, grow and deepen our relationship with God?

So we have a picture in this parable that shows us God's Kingdom as something organic, unforced, growing and developing over time, with the future harvest yield being unclear. But there's another picture, too, about the forces involved in this process. Listen again to the beginning of the reading: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everyone was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat..." A good crop was sown; and then there was sabotage. Not an accidental sowing of another crop, or seeds carrying on the wind, but a deliberate attempt to mess up what had been planted.

We don't often talk about the devil here – the first time I ever preached here it was remarked on that that was the first time for many years that the devil had been mentioned in this church. Well, he comes up again in this reading, because Jesus goes on to explain that that's who sowed those weeds. Now, the point here is not whether you think of the devil as a being, or as a force, or as a negation. The point here is that there is deliberate sabotage taking place. It's not just about God, and people, and sometimes things getting difficult or going wrong. It's also about someone, something, the devil, trying to throw us off course, trying prevent us from growing in relationship with God, trying to muddy our understanding of what's important, trying to make sure that we don't have the life that Jesus came to bring. Now that's not something for us to get het up about; but it is something for us to be aware of so that we can be on our guard.

How, I wonder, do we make sure that as far as possible we are protected from such sabotage? How do we make sure that we are using the tools God has given us to protect ourselves and each other, and to help us to stand strong when things are difficult, or painful, or costly?

Jesus is clear in his explanation that no one is stepping in to stop the work of the saboteur, because to do so could also cause harm to others. This is a picture which makes sense when we're talking about growing crops, but is perhaps harder to accept when we look at all that's going on in the world around us and wonder why God doesn't sort it out. It's a good example of the limitations of any such picture language, because of course where this picture falls short is that the weeds in the story will always be weeds and the wheat will always be wheat, whereas people, on the other hand, can change, and tend to be a mixture of good and bad motives and decisions. When we look at what's going on in the world and wonder why God doesn't step in to sort it out, there's the dilemma that some of what happens is good done with bad intentions, and some is bad done with good intentions, and some is mistakes from which people can learn and grow, and a lot is just the ripple of consequences of our own actions and those of others, and to step in would be to undermine our freedom and take away our responsibility.

So Jesus paints a picture of the Kingdom as organic, growing and developing towards maturity, subject to sabotage, not entirely safe from the consequences of being in a mixed up, fallen world. And where does that leave us? Well, perhaps it leaves us with the words of the psalm set for this morning, some of which we heard just before the gospel reading and which can be found on the back of today's bulletin: "Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name." Our responsibility, individually and collectively, is to walk God's way, to hold fast to God's truth, to live and grow in relationship with God. And so let us make that our prayer this morning.