

Sermon Preached at St Andrew's Lismore, 8th Sunday After Pentecost, 23 July 2023
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*Your face, my thane, is a book where men may read strange matters.
To beguile the time, look like the time.
Bear welcome in your eye, your hand, your tongue.
Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it.*

Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth here counsels her husband in the art of deception in Act One of *Macbeth*. In order to effect their evil deed, she advises him to suit his looks to the occasion of welcoming their visitor. As Macbeth learns fully after the evil deed, he must make his face a mask to his heart, disguising what he truly is (III:II).

False face must hide what the false heart doth know (I:IV).

In Syria and Palestine there grows a weed, a species of Rye-Grass, the seeds of which are a strong poison. Its danger is in its ability to deceive. Apparently it is quite successful in its deception because it bears a close resemblance to wheat. Only when the ear appears can the difference between the weed and the good wheat be discerned.

While the trained farmer can detect this deception early, a careless or cursory look fails to identify the presence of this noxious weed amongst the good crop.

Only in Jesus' parable of the weeds, do we hear in the scriptures of this weed and its capacity for deception.

Whether it's in a stage play or out on the fields, deception is a powerful weapon.

There is certainly evil in the world that creeps up on us and takes us by surprise. Often it's been there all along but we don't always recognise it for what it is.

In our own lives what can sometimes seem like something harmless can, if unchecked, turn into a self destructive habit.

Shakespeare eloquently and poetically expressed in his plays a deep truth: the human will is frail. Despite his courage and magnificent qualities of mind, Macbeth is beset by temptation. Self delusion and ambition lead him to murder.

This parable, together with the other parables in Chapter 13 (there are seven altogether), are important teaching material from Jesus. They form the structural centre of the gospel of Matthew.

Looking at the parable I find two things quite surprising:

Despite the weed's ability to disguise itself, its presence is identified and its influence is not underestimated.

Secondly, the farmer rejects the idea of going into the field and rooting out the weeds, for fear of endangering the good wheat: let them both grow together until the harvest.

Because of the complex intertwining of good and evil, rather than risk damage to the good, God allows both to grow together until the fullness of time. He himself will sort them out; he himself will judge.

When we are outraged by some monstrous act, perpetrated by an evil person who appears to have gotten away with it, or gotten off lightly, don't fear that God is letting us down. Remember the parable of the weeds – good and evil exist together until God's good time.

We live in a mixed economy with good and evil coexisting. Macbeth is a fictional but poetic example of this human struggle. Macbeth does actually have a moral conscience – he just chooses not to act on it. God, like the patient gardener, waits to see how we will use our free choice (longing for us to choose the good). If we don't then he waits for the right time to weed out what is useless in us, that we might bear good fruit.

In our living we have ups and downs. Sometimes producing good fruit, other times we are overwhelmed and strangled by the weeds. But while we might be deceived by the weeds, or even by our selves, we should never forget that God sees the whole garden and its potential.

I like Dinah Roe Kendall's painting based on today's Gospel, entitled *The Wheat and the Weeds*.



Please take closer look now or later on if you can. The scene is set at the time of the harvest. The confident farmer is in control of everything from an excellent vantage point. The weeds have been extracted and are being burnt on a distant field. If you look closely you can see the enemy (who secretly planted the weeds in the first place) – he crouches dejectedly, eyes downcast in disappointment. He has a small box beside him in which he keeps wild seeds to hand, perhaps to ruin future harvests.

You get the sense that while the deceiver can cause disruption, he hasn't much chance of eventual success, under the eye of the watchful, well organised farmer.

But of course the parable isn't really about farming, and how to produce a good crop. It's about the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds is about an inclusive God who puts up with us all, including our shortcomings and failures.

The farmer from last week's Parable of the Sower was a generous sower of seeds. He recklessly spread the seed regardless of where it might fall, to give all the opportunity to grow. Today's farmer is generous as well – possibly even reckless too – allowing all to grow and flourish together, risking what has been prejudged as the good crop, to allow all the chance, and he will judge in the end.

Like the farmer depicted in the painting, God has an excellent vantage point. We hope for what we do not see (to use Paul's words) in Romans 8: 12-25. God sees all, he knows the harvest potential that he created in us. But down in the field we have to patiently wait for what we do not see.

We have to believe that God can already see past our present failures and sufferings to the future liberation and glory about to be revealed. Ours is to live and act in hope and trust according to his will and vision.