

The Wheat and the Tares
The Fifth Sunday After Epiphany
(From the Gospel: *St. Matthew xiii.24 ff.*)

The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: 25 But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. 26 But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. 27 So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? 28 He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? 29 But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn...

Explanation of parable not included in BCP Gospel:

36 Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went into the house: and his disciples came unto him, saying, Declare unto us the parable of the tares of the field. 37 He answered and said unto them, He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; 38 The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; 39 The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. 40 As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. 41 The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; 42 And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

Chapter 13 of Matthew contains several parables of Jesus that begin with the phrase *the kingdom of heaven is like...* Jesus' teaching throughout the Gospels had much to say about this concept of a new Kingdom which He was inaugurating. He teaches in great detail about it, because His hearers would never before have been confronted with such concepts. The only kingdoms they knew were earthly ones ruled by men. They had suffered at the hands of unpredictable and hated monarchs such as the Herodian kings and Roman caesars. Israel's own history was a tale of the rise and fall of many diverse kings, with one notable exception, that of King David, who was promised an everlasting dynasty to be manifested some day through a descendant. It was concerning this very kingdom about which our Lord was involved in an almost desperate attempt at reeducation. The nation expected the Messiah to usher them into a time of consummate victory and grandeur, when Israel as God's chosen people would enjoy preeminence and superiority over all the races on earth. But the King Himself, who certainly could have assumed a place of power and position of the sort His audience longed for, was at great pains to turn their eyes from earth to heaven, from things material to things spiritual. And this He did, parable by parable, analogy by analogy, until their every presupposition had been abandoned.

In our age of inclusivism, when the drawing of distinctions among men is considered oppressive, judgmental, and unfair, Jesus' rigid classification of all people, as it were, into two groups, *wheat* and *tares*, is distinctly objectionable: "What do you mean," would be the cry, "that some are in a privileged class of the chosen, while the rest are arbitrarily rejected as 'weeds'? It's simply another narrative of those in power subjugating the powerless." But there's no getting around it: in our parable, some are indeed *wheat*, planted by God, nurtured by Him, intended for the great destiny of being a part of His grand harvest that will bring them some day into His *barn*, while others, having been sown by the devil, are evil by nature, whose outcome is separation from the others and fiery destruction. Man in his pride is repelled by the mere fact that God has reserved only for Himself the right to establish distinctions that affect the fate of all men. Man exclaims "Unfair!", but is it really so?

These weeds are literally the work of the devil. They are usurpers in a garden to which they have no claims for membership. In appearance they are practically indistinguishable from the wheat, which is why they grow undetected until the time of harvest, when the difference is finally unmistakable. The fact that they have grown up in intimate contact with the wheat is itself amazing. Any of us who have gardened know how hard it is to extricate mature weeds from garden crops, weeds which have been stealing the space and soil nutrients intended for the cultivated plants. We might feel sorry for weeds: they, after all, are plants in their own right. These weeds, however, are no ordinary ones. Their mysterious appearance is explained by the householder: *An enemy hath done this*. Their introduction into the field was malicious. Moreover, Jesus explains, *the tares are the children of the wicked one; The enemy that sowed them is the devil*.

Let's speculate why the devil did this. Certainly he wanted to subvert the success of the Lord's harvest. What would have been a lovely, uniform field of prime plants ready for use seems now to be spoiled and ruined. The weeds, like squatters on stolen land, stand tall and strong in their arrogance, laughing at the prospect of the mature wheat being good for anything at all now. The harvest would appear a failure. In order for it to succeed, the weeds by necessity will have to receive the same treatment as the wheat. The reapers will be forced to accord them the equal status for the sake of preserving the wheat intact. God will have to bow to the devil's terms for the sake of His chosen; He will have no choice!

This is a dilemma of huge proportions, and so it must receive a supernatural solution:

The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Angels will accomplish the impossible, and effect the absolute separation that this grievous situation requires. Now we must attempt to apply this parable to life in general, and to our times in particular.

According to the Scriptures, the world is indeed divided into two camps, but the distinction is by no means obvious and evident. It only makes sense that great pains would be taken to disguise the true identity of that which is the work of the devil. Scripture calls him *subtle*: *Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made* says Genesis 3:1. As these faux-wheat plants mature, they would be working in every way to displace the true harvest. They would hide beneath the appearance of goodness and righteousness --would they not?-- and do their utmost to disparage and slander their competitors with whom they are in a deadly match for survival. They would attempt to seize control of all sources of power and authority in order to play the game as effectively as possible, doing so with ever increasing desperation born of the fear that the coming of the Landowner, and the angelic reapers, is drawing inexorably nearer!

Does this not describe the status quo today? Does it not explain to a tee the uneasy consciences of all men everywhere? Yes, this has been a process that has been underway with every preceding generation, but the tale is nearing its conclusion. There have always been the evil and the good. Only Heaven, however, can pin labels on the appropriate lapels, because when the good start calling themselves “the good” they can easily be accused of self-righteousness. Often they have done so anyway, and have given the world a distorted impression of religion, as if believers considered themselves better than others. But “the good” must claim a righteousness that has been imparted to them freely by the only One who is absolutely good: God Himself. They have nothing to boast of. And their experience in this world will not be one of those of a privileged status. They will be persecuted and mistreated, misunderstood and rejected, marginalized and ostracized, until the final harvest, when *the righteous* [will] *shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father*.

Meanwhile, the wicked own the day. They have the preeminence, they occupy the highest seats, they enjoy the praise and adoration of the world, they bask in the peace and happiness that are the lot of those who have figured out how to turn the volume knob of conscience and God’s voice completely off, and succeed in nearly driving the righteous to despair (*note OT Lesson*).

Look around you. There are tares everywhere. There is some wheat, as well, but sometimes it appears to be precious little. Laid upon us is the duty of winning souls. We all started as weeds, and became wheat by dint of our conversion to Christ. Surely there are many more candidates for the *kingdom of heaven* who await the same change we have enjoyed. It is the Gospel that transforms weeds into wheat. Weeds are unattractive. And the fact their mission has been to literally supplant the wheat makes them even more undesirable. But it is to them we are sent. We want the *householder* to receive the largest and best harvest which His own toils among us two thousand years ago were directed toward. We have our work cut out for us!