

So it's finally happened: the pile of bricks has been moved from the back to the front garden, the building site levelled and the grass seed sown.

And now, like the farmer in another of Jesus' parables, I quietly watch and wait. Of course the brambles and another, as yet unidentified, invasive weed are pushing through. I long to go and tear them up or soak them with weed killer, but instead I stand by helplessly watching and waiting, wondering "how long, how long, O Lord before the grass seed will shoot away?" and make my prayer that water, light, nutrition will make the grass strong enough to survive.

Matthew's parable seeks to make sense of the world in which we live by assuring his readers (1) that Good and Evil exist together and uprooting one would damage the other and (2) the Householder is present with his servants, sharing their concern, while the Evil One has already departed.

In a way we see Matthew struggling to answer the age old problem of evil by attributing the bad weeds to the action of the enemy coming perilously close to a non-Christian explanation. But Matthew is particularly fond of dividing the world into two camps into goodies and baddies, sheep and goats, wise and foolish good fruit and bad, "us" versus "them".

But you know Matthew is less sectarian in this parable than we might expect – Yes there are good eggs and bad eggs but it is more complicated

than simply “us” and “them”, “in” and “out”, “Church” versus “the World”.

For, he warns, the church can be infested. And one of the subtle points of the original parable is this: the Wheat and the Darnel are indistinguishable (at least to begin with); the darnel looks, and sounds and acts the same as the good wheat. Matthew’s point is it is hard to tell who the goodies are and who the baddies are!

But this surely is a realistic picture that Matthew paints of the world in which we live: good and evil, kind and unkind, selfless and selfish live side by side, cheek by jowl, and sometimes it is very hard to tell who is who and which is which!

Therefore we need to be less hasty in our judging – for it is not our place to rush in a judge, condemn and destroy. It is far more important for us to learn how to live in this complicated world, to encourage a spirituality that will give us the courage to go on living when the going gets tough and to pray “deliver us from evil”.

But, and it is a very big but...are we really called to be passive onlookers like the people in Bloemaert’s telling painting: as the labourers take a nap (and it looks like they’ve consumed a flagon of wine) the evil one has

slipped in. Are we really called to do nothing in the face of poverty, religious fundamentalism, prejudice and climate change deniers?

The commentator Janet Foggieⁱⁱⁱ reminds us that there are times when action is NOT the best option, there are situations which we ought to leave to God even when the desire to ‘play God’ and tear up the weeds is overwhelming.

Again, we need to pray for the spiritual resources to live in the world we find ourselves in with its mixture of bad and good...to keep awake, to be alert, to have patience and to trust in God’s action.

And I find myself, when my patience and passivity is wearing thin, recalling the wonderful line uttered by Sonny in the Best Marigold Hotel, which in our household has the same authority as Julian of Norwich “everything will be all right in the end and if everything is not all right then it isn’t the end”!

In other words, going back to the parable, Matthew uses the parable to say

- Life’s complicated
- There’s a mixture of good and bad in the world
- There’s a mixture of good and bad in the church
- There’s a mixture of good and bad in the fields of our hearts

They coexist for the time being, because to pull one out would damage the other; but do not be afraid God knows and suffers with His creation and has set up a ladder between heaven and earth so is with us in our trials and tribulations; God is present and will prevail for he has already defeated and expelled the Evil One.

But having said all that, I am still looking forward to playing God with my lawn in a few weeks' time!!

ⁱ Living Word ed. Hodgson and Serjeant

ⁱⁱ <https://www.spiritualityofconflict.com/>