

Each of the gospels have a symbol which portray the perspective of that gospel ... Mark is a lion roaring ... Luke an ox ... John an eagle in flight ... and the symbol for Matthew's gospel is a human face. You may have been introduced to these before and at some time I may say more about them but for today let us think a bit about the human face symbol for Matthew.

In sculptures and religions in the Ancient Near East the human form symbolised revelation and intelligence and being human indicated an ability to have understanding.

About ¼ of Matthew's gospel contains teaching and sayings of Jesus and for Matthew Jesus is not just a rabbi, but the human face of God giving teaching and understanding of the nature and will of God ... and today's gospel reading confirms this.

Today's parable is the first of six which all begin with the words 'The kingdom of heaven is like ...' and all these parables challenging Jesus' listeners ... and for that matter us ... to think beyond some of the ideas they already formed.

This parable, sometimes called the 'parable of the weeds' speaks of a farmer sowing seeds ... wheat or corn ... only to find that as the seeds started to grow there is a large amount of weeds or tares which have also taken root. Tares are a mongrel form of wheat, with smaller leaves, suitable for chicken feed but quite unfit for human consumption.

What is the farmer to do? His servants suggest they will pull out these weeds or tares ... but the farmer realises in doing this and because of the large amount of weeds they are likely to pull out much of the good developing crop as well ... so he tells them to leave it and when it comes harvest time, when the plants are larger and easier to recognise ... then to take out the weeds and bind and burn them and then harvest the good crop.

Jesus' listeners and his disciples would have been familiar with this scenario and wonder what the inference of all this is. Matthew does not have Jesus explaining the parable there and then ... he does that later, with his disciples.

This interval between the parable and interpretation achieves two purposes. First ... it reminds Matthew's readers that Jesus did not give instant answers, nor explain his material to everyone. Parables are intended to stimulate thought and to lead to response.

A theologian John Proctor states the because of their cryptic style, the parables were always potentially divisive, sharpening the interest of those who wanted to follow Jesus ... puzzling any who did not want to follow.

Secondly, the gap creates room and time for us ... the readers ... to think about the meaning of the parable for ourselves. It draws us into the story ... and into the crowd who were themselves trying to understand what Jesus intended.

The explanation Jesus gives to his disciples falls into two sections. Verses 37-39 are like a little dictionary ... they define the meaning of each of the words in the parable:

- The sower is the Son of Man.
- The field is the world.
- The good seeds are the children of the kingdom.
- The weeds are the children of the evil one.
- The enemy who sowed the weeds is the devil.
- The harvest is the end of the age.
- The reapers are the angels.

The second section vs 40-45 speak of the end of the age ... the coming judgement of God.

In all this, two things stand for me.

Firstly, this parable talks about patience ... about waiting.

We live in a world where there are many things which are not ideal. There is war ... natural disasters ... effects of climate change ... famine ... refugees living in appalling circumstances ... domestic violence ... malnutrition ... greed ... poverty ... broken relationships ... and so much more. And we may wonder where is God ... why isn't God acting?

I believe God gave humanity free will and much of what is occurring is an accumulation of environmental changes of the world and decisions made by so many people over a huge period of time ... decisions which are not God centred.

Yes, we can act with God's guidance, to do as much as we can to alleviate all the distress in the world ... but at the same time we need to have patience ... wait ... and waiting is what we all find difficult. The farmer in the parable waits for the harvest time watching in frustration as the weeds grow alongside the wheat.

We have a tendency to want things to happen ... NOW ... but that is not how God works! In fact, there are times in my life when I have found God's timing infuriating ... but in hindsight I found it very beneficial.

Secondly, Jesus speaks of the 'End Time' ... a time when God will harvest ... and will sort out the weeds from the good crop ... a time when God will be the ultimate judge ... judging that divides and rewards people according to what they have done and who they have been.

This parable and its interpretation invite us to think for ourselves ... to have patience while we wait for God to act as God sees fit ... and to keep our hope in God's judgement alive.

We are human ... we have been given the gift of thought and reflection and understanding ... Matthew draws on these gifts in his recording of Jesus life and ministry and what the incidents recorded mean for us today.

*May God grant us the persistence to do what he wills us to do, and the patience not to try to do His. For Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.*