



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 19 July by the Reverend Canon Tim Stevens, Canon Precentor.

The Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Genesis 28: 10-19; Matthew 13: 24-30 and 36-43

Preaching in this month often feels a little bit like getting into practice to take over as the next presenter of BBC's Gardeners' World – not that any devotee would ever hope not to be greeted each Friday evening by the dulcet tones of Monty Don.

Last week, we heard the parable of the sower, next week we will hear the parable of the mustard seed, and this week, sandwiched in between, we have just heard Jesus teach about the wheat and the tares.

Lots of teaching on a horticultural theme.

If you were listening carefully though, you will have realised that this parable has nothing whatever to do with gardening. Jesus begins: *"The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field"*.

Jesus is talking about the Kingdom of Heaven. This should be no surprise – Jesus teaches about the Kingdom of Heaven more than he does about any other subject. The Gospels share no fewer than 67 teachings of Jesus about the Kingdom of Heaven – God the Father is pushed firmly into second place, with ten fewer teachings, and faith itself in third place, has only 48 attempts by Jesus to help us understand.

Our understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven clearly matters to Jesus. But why? Why, you might ask yourself, is our understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven so important? We can't change the kingdom, we can't experience it during this life, any understanding we gain surely won't make us want to end up there any more than we should already.

And yet, 67 times, Jesus teaches his disciples, teaches us, about this kingdom.

When we come together, each and every day, each and every service, we share a set of words. We pray the Lord's Prayer, and in that, we pray that God's Kingdom would come on earth, as in heaven. This is a new longing for God's Kingdom. Not just that it is something to look forward to, somewhere we hope to end up, surrounded by the angels who we heard Jacob dream of in our first reading, enjoying the music of celestial harps, and making friends only with the very nicest of people, who will never upset us, speak a bad word about us, or give us any reason to want a stiff drink before bedtime.

I'm being flippant – I realise that. But Jesus isn't.

If we are thinking as I have just articulated, then we need to come back to Jesus' parable. Jesus came to live as one of us, to share as one of us, to fully understand us, and to teach us what is needed to show the goodness of God's kingdom here on earth, as it is in heaven.

C S Lewis, in his satirical book "The Screwtape Letters" explores what it is for God to have visited the earth in human form. Screwtape, the demon, writing to his nephew and mentee, Wormwood, says of demons that "never having been a human, you (the junior demon) don't realise how enslaved they are to the pressure of the ordinary".

Jesus has been one of us. Not in any pretend form, not simply the divine visiting earth, but fully human and one of us, as well as being fully divine and knowing the will of his father. And in his teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus shares with us the ordinary.

A picture of the kingdom which is as earthly as it could be. The wheat, the good grain, growing in the fields, and being surrounded by the weeds which have been planted by the evil one in the same ground. And not only farmers will understand this. Every gardener gathered here this morning will now be picturing bindweed, dandelions, and that awful little purple leaved plant that comes up through every crack in the patio, and whose name I haven't even discovered.

As is so often the case – Jesus' teaching is revolutionary. The slaves of the householder have a completely natural, completely ordinary reaction. Indeed, the reaction that perhaps the demons Screwtape and Wormwood might hope they would have.

Shall we go and gather all the weeds?

If they gathered the weeds, if they walked up and down among the crops, if they disturbed roots, pulled bindweed off flower stems, just imagine the damage they would do. While they were there, should they perhaps also pull up every wheat stem which had not reached a certain size? Should they measure each plant against an expected standard, and any that is not good enough, be pulled up and cast into the fire along with the weeds?

What a view of the Kingdom of Heaven – or of the Kingdom we long to see on earth.

I wonder, if we looked at the crops as Jesus goes on to explain, the good seed being the children of the Kingdom, how we would feel if the landowner, if the Son of Man, came among us to root out the evil, and then began to measure the standards of good.

Which of us can sit here this morning and feel confident that we deserve our place in the Kingdom?

Two weeks ago, we had the joy of sharing in the confirmation service, where seven of our own congregation were confirmed by Bishop Fiona. Preparing candidates for confirmation is always such a joy, and this year was no exception. During our preparations, one of the group said that he would like to know more about suffering. To understand more about why there is so much suffering in the world. To get to grips with how those who suffer can still know and feel God's love.

This morning's parable is the perfect answer to this question. We are told that the Son of Man has sown the good seed, while the evil one has sown the bad. Conflict, straight away.

We know from the book of Genesis, far earlier than the passage we heard this morning, that when God looked at the world he had made, he saw that it was good. God did not place evil into the world. God did not intend evil. But whether we believe literally that the serpent, Eve, and then Adam, disobeyed God, or whether this is a metaphor for our own human weakness and failure, our minds are turned from good to bad.

Perhaps not all the time, hopefully not as a matter of course, but if I asked you to put your hand up if you had not done, said, or even thought, anything in the last week which you were ashamed of, I suspect there wouldn't be many hands up.

Coming back to C S Lewis, we know that Jesus understands. He has shared this with us, been one of us, experienced humanity. And he tells us this morning that the weeds must continue to grow, and that only at the end, will they be separated from the wheat.

This is a beautiful image of mercy over indifference. If suffering in the world is because God is indifferent, then I agree, we should want to know everything we can possibly know about the Kingdom of Heaven, because what else is there when God doesn't care about the here and the now. But if suffering in the world is because God is merciful, wants us all to grow, wants us all to turn back to him, in our own time and in our own way, then there is hope for us all.

God's mercy allows all people to live together, to think, and decide for themselves how to live, and to turn back to him who is ready and waiting to welcome them.

God's kingdom come, God's will be done, on earth as in heaven.

There's one more thing to say, and that is that Jesus is no longer walking the earth, teaching about the Kingdom, either on earth or in heaven. If a change is to be seen, if God's will is to be done, if the kingdom is to be seen on earth, suffering decline and hope increase, that can only be done by us.

By humans, who are not perfect. By humans who, as we've already seen, have not been tempted to put their hands up and admit to being faultless. But we are nonetheless those who have been planted, and who can grow to, as Jesus said, shine like the sun in the Kingdom of the Father.

But to shine like the sun is a pretty bright kind of shining. It takes confidence, courage, and determination. It takes enthusiasm to bring others with us. It takes effort to behave as we are called, and therefore to bring hope and joy to others. It takes faithfulness, to reduce suffering, turn hearts, convince minds, and let God's kingdom be seen, let God's kingdom come, on earth as in heaven.

Are we ready for this? Is it time for God's kingdom to be seen on earth as in heaven? Can we cope with all that this means? Are we really able to be the people Jesus calls us to be? Can we seek to shine like the sun?

As Jesus says at the very end of this parable, let anyone with ears, listen.

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19 July 2026