

The Harvesters are Angels By Jennie McGinlay

Hymns from *Singing the Faith*

Call to worship (adapted from *The Methodist Worship Book*)

As we gather, separate yet united, give us, Lord, a vision of your glory, that we may worship you today in spirit and in truth, and offer the praise of glad and thankful hearts; through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Hymn 123

Come, ye thankful people, come,
raise the song of harvest home;
all is safely gathered in,
ere the winter storms begin.
God our Maker doth provide
for our wants to be supplied;
come to God's own temple, come,
raise the song of harvest home.

All the world is God's own field,
fruit as praise to God we yield;
wheat and weeds together sown
are to joy or sorrow grown.
First the blade and then the ear,
then the full corn shall appear;
Lord of harvest, grant that we
wholesome grain and pure may be.

For the Lord our God shall come,
and shall take the harvest home;
from the field shall in that day
all offenses purge away,
give his angels charge at last
in the fire the weeds to cast;
but the fruitful ears to store
in his care for evermore.

Even so, Lord, quickly come,
to thy final harvest home;
gather thou thy people in,
free from sorrow, free from sin,
there, forever purified,
in thy presence to abide;
come, with all thine angels come,
raise the glorious harvest home.

Prayer of Approach (from www.urc.org.uk)

God our guide and goal,
may your Spirit touch our hearts
so that as we listen for your Word in Scripture,
we may open our minds to you
and find inspiration to follow you more closely.
This we pray, as your people, blessed by you,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
Amen

Prayer of Confession

Father you never promised that life would be trouble free
Forgive us when we become angry and frustrated when people are difficult and when things go wrong.
We say that we have put our trust in you but fail to act in accordance with the faith we profess.
We are sorry Lord for our sometimes weak faith; we pray for your forgiveness and ask that you strengthen us to fully trust in your care for us.

We thank you for your gracious acceptance of us with all our faults and weaknesses, and for your willingness to let us confess again and again.

To all who turn to Christ, He says, “Your sins are forgiven.”

Amen

Lord’s Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your Kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven
Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours.
Now and for ever. Amen

Reading: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The Parable of the Weeds

²⁴ Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

²⁷ “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

²⁸ “‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

²⁹ “‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

The Parable of the Weeds Explained

³⁶ Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.”

³⁷ He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

⁴⁰ “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. ⁴² They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

Reflection

My daily walks have taken me past a lot of unmown, wildlife friendly grass recently and it struck me how many different kinds of grass there are. My husband pointed out that one particular kind looked very much like wheat and we joked that it’s a blessing to the world that we are not farmers, as we would have poisoned somebody by now!

The gospel of Matthew was written for the Jews, a primarily agrarian society, who would therefore easily relate to stories about crops. In this parable, we see the owner of a field planting good seed to produce wheat. In the night, his enemy deviously plants some other seeds with the wheat, described here as “weeds,” which most Bible scholars think was probably a plant called darnel, which is widespread in the Middle East. As darnel grows, it is almost identical in appearance to wheat and the difference only becomes apparent close to harvest time, when the genuine wheat ears become heavy and cause the plant to lean over, while the darnel remains upright. Interestingly, darnel is poisonous to both animals and people.

Jesus doesn't always explain His parables but in this case He does. The planter of the good seed represents the Son of Man, a title used for Jesus Himself. Note that in the story, this person is the owner of the field, which Jesus says represents the world. It follows then, that Jesus is saying that He Himself owns the world.

Who are the "people of the Kingdom" who are represented by the good seed, as opposed to the "people of the evil one?" In the contemporary Jewish setting, the bad seed could represent the Pharisees, whom Jesus had frequently accused of hypocrisy. The Jews had two sources of teaching at this time – the Pharisees, who were traditionally the trusted teachers of the day, in contrast to Jesus, with His new and radical teaching about love and forgiveness. Given their history and culture, it would not necessarily have been clear which side was genuine "wheat" and which was "weed." Some scholars suggest that the burning of the bad crop at the "end of the age" (v40) was fulfilled with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70AD and the "burning up" of bad teaching.

However, this parable has meaning for us too, for the whole world. Jesus planted the seed of Kingdom truth and hope, not only for the ancient Jews, but for the world. Remember "the field is the world" (v38), not merely Israel. Put simply, we might say that the world is divided into believers and unbelievers but is it really so clear cut? There is undeniably evil and false teaching in the world. We see this in the actions of some powerful world leaders and in the way that greedy commercial interests cause poverty and suffering. We have also seen church members in positions of power abusing children, sometimes covered up by church leaders.

It cannot be a simple case of believers = good, unbelievers = bad. Those who don't believe in Christ as the Messiah include millions of adherents to other faiths who have never known Jesus, including, for example, the Sikhs who regularly serve free food to the homeless and poor in the Gurdwara (temple) each week, as well as Muslims who work with the Qurbani, the Islamic charity for the relief of poverty. Those are just two of many examples. As well as these, there are those who have carefully considered matters and come to the conclusion that they just cannot believe in a God, while living generous, charitable lives. How arrogant we would be to describe these sincere human beings as corrupting weeds.

Yet Jesus has made clear that salvation only lies in faith in Him. What do we do about this dilemma? The good news for Christians is that "the harvesters are angels" (v39). As the servants were instructed not to uproot the weeds in the field, *we* are not to claim the position of judges and mete out punishment to those whom we consider to be the "weeds." There are times when we cry out to God and lament the evil in this world and ask Him in desperation why He allows such horrors to continue. We puzzle over the reluctance of good people to discern and accept the truth of Christ. We *should* speak out about injustice and poverty; indeed, as we follow Jesus, we must be like him in showing love, condemning injustice and relieving pain and suffering where we can. And we *must* share our faith, spreading the gospel to the best of our ability. But, in the parable, the owner instructs his *harvesters* to collect the weeds, not the worried servants, and we need to always remind ourselves that the harvesters are *angels* acting according to Jesus' instructions.

So the lesson here is that judgement and condemnation is not our job. Our role is to grow as strong, healthy wheat, doing all that Jesus asks and trusting him with the ultimate future of all things.

It is probably not helpful to speculate about exactly what is meant by the "blazing furnace" – there is no real biblical support for the idea of an eternal burning hell, as portrayed (some would say invented) by the Italian poet, Dante – but this extreme figurative language serves to emphasise the seriousness of rejecting Jesus. The "weeping and gnashing of teeth" is a Middle Eastern way of expressing extreme shame and regret.

The truth is that there is so much we simply don't know about what is here referred to as "the end of the age," but we can be cheered that "the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (v43). Whatever this will mean in practice, our ultimate salvation is surely something that our present limited selves cannot yet begin to imagine.

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray for our suffering world:

For those suffering and grieving as a result of war; for those who are victims of cruel regimes and who are deprived of the freedoms that we in the West sometimes take for granted. We pray that aid workers and all the brave people who travel to war zones to help will be strengthened and encouraged.

We thank you for and continue to pray for our medical staff, our exhausted health workers, care workers, nurses and doctors. For those who are sick, in pain and frightened, and for those who love them. Grant them courage and strength.

We pray for those countries which have suffered natural disasters, and for those who have experienced terrifying accidents or terrorist attacks. Please wrap these people in your loving arms, bring comfort, hope and relief.

Closer to home, we pray for our circuit and our churches, for all of our sisters and brothers who are suffering in any way, from illness, fear, depression or bereavement, whether or not their pain is known to us.

Please give us the strength to show love and compassion, as well as the humility to ask for help for ourselves.

Let us never lose sight of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, in whom all our hope is found.

We offer all our prayers to you in His name. Amen

Hymn 732

Day of judgment! Day of wonders!
Listen to the trumpet's sound,
louder than the voice of thunder,
echoes all creation round.
God of mercy, God of glory
may we then in Christ be found.

See the Judge, our nature wearing,
with the angel He outsoars.
Those who wait for Christ's appearing
then shall sing "This God is ours!"
Gracious Savior, Lord of glory
own us in that day as yours.

At God's call we shall awaken,
to the bidding of the Lord;
every nation will be shaken
by God's own eternal word;
Friend of sinners, Christ in glory,
intercede for us with God.

And to those who have confessed him,
loved and served the Lord below,
Christ will say, "Come now, you blessed,
see the kingdom I bestow";
God of mercy, friend of sinners,
we shall then your glory know.

Blessing (Hebrews 13:20)

Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.'