

## REFLECTION 23 JULY 2023, "WHEN WEEDS GET IN THE WAY OF LIFE"

By Rev Dr Fei Taule'ale'ausumai

Oh my gosh, thank goodness my overgrown vegetable garden is on the side of the house where no one can see it. It is taken over by weeds as tall as the fence. I keep meaning to get around to weeding it but my back only lasts about 5 minutes before I cannot go any further. I am wanting to get a gardener to come in and tidy it up. I've advertised on Bark for a quote but am still waiting for responses. Weeds just sprout up even on good soil, where do they come from. In this Matthew narrative the farmer suggests that an enemy has come in overnight and planted these weeds. It is very easy for us to put this into the context of our own lives when we have put a lot of good work into a project or life and just out of blue something just comes in and totally annihilates our efforts, unexpectedly and sometimes deliberately. This is what the farmer is suggesting that these weeds were deliberately planted to overtake and suffocate the good seeds and plants. If you think about your own life, what do the weeds look like in your life that have tried to overtake, disempower and suffocate your life? People, relationships, being in the wrong place at the wrong time? The question is, did you manage to pull those weeds out or did you just continue on with life weaving yourself in and out of the obstructions? I cannot begin to describe the different times in my life where weeds have been deliberately sown in my life overnight and sometimes stealthily and most times deliberately.

When I was a student for ministry one day I arrived home to a whole lot of fruit and vegetables and groceries at my front door. I wondered, where did they come from and what were they doing on my front step? I found out that the

Niuean community had dropped them off as part of an initial dowry for me to accept as a gift from a very recently widowed ministry student. His wife was still warm in the grave. I quickly rang my father and he said whatever you do, do not accept this gift and get someone to come and take it away. If you accept it then the Niuean people will see that you are interested in pursuing this relationship with this ministry student. Don't touch it! For myself and my parents, this felt like a huge weed that got in the way of my call to ministry. I did not see myself as a minister's wife and I had absolutely no intention of becoming one at all. Unfortunately, the stalking continued for a while to the extent that I found it very hard to attend some classes. I even was getting some fish and chips in the local takeaway when his daughter came in and tapped me on the shoulder and said, "dad said, would you like to come and eat your take aways with us?" I was being stalked and I did not feel safe at all. Those weeds really got in the way of the good plants that had been sown in my life and I had to find away to weave myself around them as I was not dealing with just one man but a whole community. There are many more weed stories like that tried to strangle the good plants in my life particularly so very close to harvest time when I was about to graduate.

There are many ways to interpret the parable of the weeds. At its most basic level, this story might be about how difficult it is to tell weeds from wheat. Bearded darnel is "an annoying weed that looks very much like wheat, especially before maturity, and can carry a poisonous fungus. If it is harvested and ground together with wheat, the resulting flour is spoiled." As the grain matures, it's easy to tell the slender heads of bearded darnel from the fuller heads of wheat, but by then, it's too late to uproot one without damaging the other. If we are part of the crowd, we simply hear that pulling weeds can cause

more harm than good, destroying the very crops we want to harvest. But this story is probably more than just a farming tip for weed control.

The parable of the weeds appears only in Matthew's gospel. According to Bill Loader, The striking aspect of the parable is the skulduggery. The parable of the Sower portrayed normal sowing operations and an abnormal harvest. This parable describes normal sowing but then an act of subversion. Such behaviour may have been known. Here in the parable it suggests all is not rosy with the realm of God. There is an enemy. A sense that there is an enemy marks many societies, religious and otherwise. It is almost as though we need an enemy, another, against whom to define ourselves. This need will sometimes sustain images of enemies, even create enemies for survival. There's 'them' and there's 'us'. The simpler, the better. This is the stuff of prejudice. Religion is exploited to hold the prejudices in place. This parable and its interpretation are well suited to serve such ends.

The obverse of such reflections is that we are equally naive if we view reality through rose tinted spectacles. An ineffective tolerance which can turn a blind eye to injustice and oppression, to exploitation and destructiveness, may sometimes masquerade as peace and harmony and its exponents become obsessed with inner stillness and survival, but this has just as little to do with the message Jesus preached. The compassion which is characteristic of God's realm calls us to look injustice in the face and to feel the pain, to recognise the systems which sustain inequality and exploitation, and to take a stand beside the marginalised. It does mean recognising what is the enemy of love. The ancient world personalised this and spoke of the devil and demons. The reality they spoke of is not to be passed by, even if for most of us it is no longer meaningful to employ the mythology which they used to describe it.

In September 2011 during his visit to Germany the then pope Benedict XVI met with victims of sexual abuse by Catholic priests and was expected to address this subject publicly. He did so only indirectly in a sermon in the Berlin Olympic Stadium, speaking in a soft voice about the "painful experience that there are good and bad fish, wheat and weeds in the Church." Almost eight years later, the pope, meanwhile retired, returns to these metaphors in a comprehensive article entitled "The Church and the Scandal of Sexual Abuse": Jesus Himself compared the Church to a fishing net in which good and bad fish are ultimately separated by God. There is also the parable of the Church as a field on which the good grain that God has sown grows, but also the weeds that "an enemy" secretly sown onto it. Indeed, the weeds in God's field, the Church, are excessively visible, and the evil fish in the net also show their strength. Nevertheless, the field is still God's field and the net is God's fishing net. And at all times, there are not only the weeds and the evil fish, but also the crops of God and the good fish.

For Benedict, the situation of the Church has evidently gotten so dire that one must be grateful to still find some good fish in the net and spot some kernels of grain amidst all the weeds.

The disciples ask for an explanation, once they are alone with Jesus, and he spells out the metaphors that matter by identifying the main characters in this story. We might get side-tracked by the things Jesus doesn't say.

He doesn't identify the servants of the landowner, for example. They must have been taking care of the field, or they wouldn't have noticed the weeds popping up. But the enemy who sowed the weeds just leaves (v 25), and Jesus doesn't explain this either.

No farmer has ever been surprised by the fact that weeds grow amidst the grain in their field. The claim that an enemy took the effort to obtain weed seed to carefully sow it alongside recently planted good seed evokes conspiracy theories among modern readers. These are intriguing images that, above all, warn of imminent judgment and impending punishment.

According to Matthew, this is the interpretation that Jesus himself provides for this parable: The field is most often identified as the Christian Church, although Jesus' own interpretation pointed beyond the community ("the field is the world"; Mt 13:38). The main point of the parable is almost always the command of the householder not to rip out the weeds but to let them grow till the harvest, so that they can be separated from each other at that point. Thus, Origen writes: "As the weed is permitted to grow together with the wheat in the Gospel. . . here too in Jerusalem. . .it is obviously not possible to purify the Church completely, as long as it is on earth."<sup>17</sup> Along with the realization that it is impossible to create a pure church, there is the warning that the damage might exceed the benefit, once the wheat is ripped out together with the weeds (Mt 13:29).

Our church the PCANZ is quite divided in terms of theology and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. We are living with both weeds and wheat in our midst, it is a co-existence but a reluctant one. Who knows what our future holds particularly as this year's General Assembly approaches and the issue of becoming an "Inclusive Church" is debated. Obviously it will not be an easy General Assembly but we will continue to pray for our church. Amen.

