

## 8 Wheat and Weeds

The Messiah, it was confidently expected by the people of Israel, by the learned and the unlearned alike, would come to put the world right, sorting out this sorry mess that everyone could see was unjust and cruel and chaotic, but everyone felt powerless to remedy. In a world where anyone with power seemed to exploit the unfairness to their own advantage, it's not surprising that people dreamed of a great, good man, powerful to right wrongs and truly on the side of those whose rights had not been recognised. The Messiah would restore the fortunes of the good and the right, who were unfairly treated by the bad and unjust. But who were the good and the right, so that they could expect God's support from the Messiah?

It would not be surprising if the Pharisees, men with a deep devotion to the Jewish Law and with sufficient resources and leisure to dwell upon the observance of its nicest distinctions, expected to be vindicated in the Messiah's coming as the pure and righteous who carry out God's will. Nor would it be surprising if the wealthiest families, the aristocratic Sadducees, the priestly caste whose sphere of power was the temple and its worship in Jerusalem, were cool to the idea of any kind of Messiah other than a great High Priest who would confirm the prerogatives of the temple. And it is not surprising if the poor and oppressed dreamed of a coming Messiah of the prophets, who would overturn the domination of the powerful and establish true justice in his kingdom. I think that every Israelite was sure the Messiah would be their kind of Messiah.

But everyone, it would seem, who believed in the Messiah, knew that the Messiah would be on Israel's side. The Messiah would end the occupation, overthrow Roman power and lift up Israel, because they were the people of God. When the Messiah comes, he will be on our side. When God acts, when the hero arrives at last, we will be vindicated.

The first century Israelites are not alone. Whenever a people fantasise evil away, they imagine super-heros who not only have the skill, ingenuity and strength to put evil in its place and finish with it, but do so, infallibly, on our behalf. Robin Hood who can split a string with an arrow shot, the agile Samurai leaping to the rescue and pulling down oppression, Batman, or a flying Superman, we all know that they're on our side. That's the essence of the plot.

There are two expectations here: one is that evil should be dealt with swiftly and surely, and the other is that evil, the "bad guys", are the other side. The judgement and punishment to be executed will not come down on us, because we are the "good guys". The rescuing hero is always our hero; the judgement is always in our favour; Superman stands not for truth and justice only, but for truth, justice and the American Way. That is what makes it so splendidly satisfactory that evil should be wrapped up and dealt with at once: we know that we will be okay afterwards.

Will the Messiah, when he comes, be a kind of Superman? If so, Jesus is not the Messiah. And for those who expect a quick sorting out, the bad guys promptly dealt with and dumped down the hole, Jesus offers a strange idea of the kingdom:

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The kingdom of heaven, he said, is like this. A man sowed clean seed in his field, but during the night a neighbor who was hostile to him came and sowed weeds into the crop. When the plants came up, there were the weeds among all the wheat. The men reported this and asked if they should go and pull up the weeds, but the landowner replied: “No, you might pull up the wheat with the weeds. Let them both grow together till harvest; then you can collect the weeds and burn them, and gather the wheat into the barn.”

(Matt 13: 24 – 39)

It is a dangerous thing to let weeds grow. They spread; they take over. They strangle the plants you want to grow. Normally, you root out the weeds wherever they appear. But not necessarily in a good crop. I remember seeing the wheat ripen in Western Australia, the hot sun bringing on the crop and the farmers watching anxiously for the day to go in with the harvester. But there was also the wild oats – scattered thru the crop, standing proudly above the wheat and catching the wind. But fortunately, the wild oats would ripen and fall first. When the combine harvester went in, what was left of them would be blown away with the chaff.

Perhaps that's something like the parable Jesus told. In Jesus' understanding of the kingdom, process itself was important. The rule of God does not begin after all wrongs have been put right, but it is already there, like a great crop growing to its fulfillment, while the wrongs and evils still seem to flourish. Sorting out good and evil in the world will not be an act of instantaneous power, even for the kingdom of God. But the kingdom of God will be there, the crop of God's kingdom already growing, while God is still dealing with the evil discovered in the world.

The rule of God will begin – it was already then beginning – while there is still wrong and disorder and unhappiness in the world. For the beginning of the rule of God is the process of repentance and change itself, whereby God overcomes, sets aside or transforms the evil in the world. For it is not at all so sure that evil is not rooted in ourselves, in Israel itself, or that the bad guys are on the other side. We would like a clean break and a totally fresh start so that from now on, under the rule of God everything would be different. Everything is to be different. But not by the sudden disappearance of all the world's wrongs. The whole manifesto of Jesus is to be implemented as a radical change in the way of all things – accepted and lived by those who believe, as a light to show the world what God is doing, even while the weeds still grow and the world, if it is blind to the light, still thinks that nothing has changed.

If it were not so, who could benefit? We have already seen from Mark's gospel that, when put to the test, nobody, not even Jesus' disciples, was ready either for the demands or for the opportunities of the kingdom. And the truth is that we are not ready-made and fit subjects for the kingdom. Fortunately for us all, the kingdom is measured not by God's power to enforce God's way, but by the needs of God's people, who are so mixed up in the wicked world that its destruction would destroy them too, if destruction comes before they are ripe.

The point is one that many find an obstacle – that the kingdom, and therefore the work of the Messiah, goes on in the midst of a world that is still evil. When God establishes God's rule, there will still be the sorting out of evil – for evil itself cannot be overthrown before the rule of God has come. The fact is - and Jesus does not say

how long it will continue to be so - that in the coming of God's kingdom we experience not only the judgement and ending of evil, but the continuing scandal of it and the struggle against it.

We would expect the Messiah to be on our side, that the kingdom of God will be welcome to us, that the hero-rescuer of the good guys will not be fighting us. But the truth is that not only do good and evil people co-exist, but good and evil co-exist within one person. Our world, our society, is an interaction of all kinds, living with and thru and in one another, and it isn't as if any of us stand out as "goodies" likely to thrive under the rule of God when all the "baddies" have been removed.

When we know who we are, when we measure ourselves by the standards Jesus has given us, we have to ask: How could the kingdom of God arrive and the Messiah be manifest in triumph without destroying all of us, in a zeal to purge the world of error and evil? How can the coming of the kingdom of God be anything but the condemnation of all our sorry and misguided work? John the Baptist had foreseen the Messiah coming with the final judgement of God, and so he had seen repentance as urgent preparation for the Messiah's coming, a preparation that would run out of time when the Messiah arrived.

And urgent it is. But when Jesus came, his work, like John's, was still to preach and to warn. He went around the towns with that message, right into their homes and public meetings with an urgent call to change. But urgent tho his message was, as he encountered that sorry and misguided world he did not condemn it.

Seeing the bustling crowds, he had pity on them, because they were troubled and lost like sheep without a shepherd. (Matt 9:36)

If Jesus had thought that the kingdom of God could only be the condemnation and destruction of evil, he was seeing now in the busy crowds of Capernaum and the other Galilean towns and villages that something else was called for. Not a blinding response of God to damn the bad and rescue the good – but help from God to turn a confused and leaderless people into the way of salvation. Boldly, he took an image from the scriptures, and from John's own preaching, and gave it a new interpretation.

He said to his disciples: "The harvest is huge, and there are very few to work on it. Ask the owner to send more workers to the harvest." (Matt 9:37)

Harvest had been an image of God's final judgement. Joel, one of the later prophets, had spoken of the terrible day when God would come in judgement upon the nations of the wicked. It would be like a harvest, everything cut by the sickle or crushed in the winepress:

In the valley of Jehoshaphat I will sit in judgement on the nations. Put your sickle to work, for the harvest is ripe. Come and tread the grapes, for the winepress is full. (Joel 3: 12 - 13)

This was an image of irresistible authority coming with unlimited power and commanding all before it: the final avenger, who needed no one's help, come for the final reckoning. In Jesus' time, John had foreseen the Messiah, his winnowing fan

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and his threshing floor all ready, coming with an unquenchable fire to destroy the chaff that is left when harvesting and threshing is done. But now Jesus saw the harvest, that great and final judgement of God, as itself a job to be done with care and concern, and he did not hesitate to say that he was looking for help. So is Jesus the Messiah, or is he yet another precursor?

If the kingdom is coming with him, it is coming not as an instantaneous irruption. It is something happening, coming about, news to be spread and an opportunity to be taken. There is time to hear about it and respond. If Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah, that moment when he looked upon the busy population of the Galilean towns and countryside, and instead of condemning their ignorance and wickedness, was moved to pity them, is a defining moment in all human history: the moment of God's decision, to forgive and to save.

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Jesus sent his disciples preaching around the towns, and he gave them something of his own power to heal and to overthrow the demons. (We heard this also from Mark's gospel.) They were to go to the "lost sheep" of the house of Israel, not to the pagan gentiles or even to the half-Israelite Samaritans. They were to proclaim that the kingdom of God is at hand, asking no payment for their work, for they can be sure that God, their employer, will pay their wages. The day of judgement is still in the future, but already the way that people receive their message will be decisive for their future judgement, and, in that sense, it is already the judgement.

If anyone fails to welcome you or listen to your message, shake the dust of their house and town off your feet. It will be easier for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah than for those towns, in the day of judgement.

(Matt 10: 14 – 15)

In the teaching of Jesus there is an unresolved tension: the reality of the kingdom is already here, but the kingdom is still a message, an offer of God's future to be trusted and received or to be rejected.

The coming rule of God is more than instantaneous judgement that wipes out the wicked and vindicates the good. Jesus had seen how unfit for the kingdom were the very people who had been prepared for it through ages of history. He had seen how the very ones who prided themselves on being on the right side for when the Messiah comes could only find themselves facing his judgement. He had found that his people's response to the kingdom was negative. He was criticised for dining and partying in the company of reprobates, as much as John had been criticised for his austere lifestyle in the wilderness. People didn't know what they wanted, except that they wanted to criticise, perhaps in order to feel justified themselves.

The towns where Jesus had lived and carried out most of his works had ultimately ignored him. They had higher ambitions than to follow an uncertain message of God's kingdom. If Jesus had looked on them with pity, his pity did not warm them. In the end he had to declare that they would be judged and that their judgement would be to their everlasting shame.

And you, Capernaum, did you expect to be exalted to the skies? You will be thrown down into the pit. (Matt 11: 23)

Capernaum was not the last city and Israel and not the only nation to enjoy the breath of God's kingdom and the benefits of Jesus' message and yet refuse to follow his teaching. There was nothing exceptionally callous about Jesus' contemporaries and certainly no grounds here for any anti-semitic conclusion. What Jesus said of Capernaum would have to be said of the cities of modern "Christian" nations. In London, Paris or New York the gospel has been heard and Jesus' work of forgiveness and healing has been seen. Yet still they have other ambitions, altogether too exalted a view of their destinies to be bending to the message of the kingdom of God.

But that is not all the story. Jesus was not only disappointed; he was also heartened and exalted by the response of many others. Given time to hear the news of what God was doing, and time to see what it meant, many of the simple, ordinary people were able to recognise and to welcome it.

The clearest shout of joy in all the gospels is here, right beside the condemnation of Capernaum, for Jesus' pity had been vindicated. As he and his disciples reached out, there were those who responded: simple people for whom there were none of the important preoccupations and reservations that held back others of higher status and larger pretensions.

I bless you Father, Lord of heaven and earth. You have hidden all this from the clever and the experts, and revealed it to little children. Yes Father, that is how you meant it to be. (Matt 11: 25 – 26)

In spite of all the ignorance and opposition something wonderful has begun to happen, and Jesus' compassion and sympathy for the crowds has borne fruit. Something remarkable is emerging. It is only a glimpse, a beginning, but it is the beginning of something unheard of before: that the people, the ordinary, unplaced people should be the first to know God. In the compassion of Jesus, in his option for the weak and leaderless, they are beginning to see God.

My Father has given me everything. No one knows the Son but the Father and no one knows the Father but the Son, and those to whom the Son reveals him. (Matt 11:27)

Yahweh, the God of Israel had always been "slow to anger and rich in mercy,"<sup>1</sup> and in the moment of the kingdom's coming, it is that forgiving patience that triumphs. God welcomes sinners repenting, and welcomes those who are deemed to be sinners – offenders who are pushed out by society because of their work or their lifestyle. Jesus went to dinner parties with the worst kind of people, and when he was criticised, he pointed out,

"Healthy people don't need the doctor. Sick people do. I haven't come to call good people, but sinners." (Matt 9: 12 – 13)

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 34:6

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When the rule of God begins, we would expect it, and we certainly want it, to be a clean break. There is much (so much!) that is wrong with the world, and all this would surely disappear when the kingdom of God comes. There is no compatibility, no scope for evil once God begins to rule in human affairs: there cannot be. But in the coming of God's kingdom, there is a place for sinners. It is the place of God's compassion and forgiveness, where Jesus reaches out to them, dines and chats with them, works with them to establish the kingdom of God.

The utter compassion of God issues in the invitation of Jesus:

Come to me all of you who are labouring and struggling with your burdens and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. You will find release and rest for your lives, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matt 11: 28 – 30)

None of this would be possible if the coming of God's rule upon earth took the form of instantaneous judgement. It is possible because, as Jesus had realised when confronted with the confused and leaderless crowds of his people, the real and definitive coming of God's rule is a process of encounter with God. That process goes on over time, and the kingdom grows and step by step takes hold. But it is already real because Jesus is with them reaching out to them in its very reality and power; and definitive, because it is the whole power and compassion of God that is now, without reserve or postponement, put before them to serve them.

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So, what is the coming of God's kingdom like? A glimpse of God? The triumph of the Messiah? The arrival of Superman? The beginning of the endless reign of justice and good to the utter confusion and destruction of evil? Jesus understood that to describe the kingdom of God, over which the Messiah would rule, new images were needed, and that those who were ready to understand would understand, while others just wouldn't get it, or not yet ...

When God begins to rule, it's something very odd, like a man going out to sow wheat, and he throws it about everywhere as if he doesn't care where it grows. Some of the seed falls on the pathway, where the birds see it and come and have a feast. Some falls in among the rocks, where the soil is welcoming but shallow. There it will spring up rapidly, make a great show, and die as soon as the weather gets dry, because there's nowhere for it to put down roots. And some of the seed is scattered into the weedy patches where thistles grow up and strangle it. It's all a crazy waste of effort and good seed – there's so much to stop it growing. But some of it falls on good ground, and there you see the use of it. It harvests a fantastic increase, maybe thirty or sixty times what the farmer sowed, maybe even a hundredweight for every pound of seed scattered.

But then again, you could say it's like that man who sowed good seed in his fields and then let the weeds grow up with it, until the time was right for separating them out.

It's like a fishing net thrown into the sea. You drag it along and haul it out – full of fish of all sorts. Some are no good, so you throw them away, but the good ones you collect together in baskets for the market.

Or again, it's like planting the tiny seed of a huge bush. When you plant it, it's so small, but when it grows it puts out long branches big enough for the birds of the sky to come and roost in it. Or it's like putting a pinch of yeast into a mass of flour. The woman who makes the bread mixes it in and that little bit of yeast makes the whole loaf rise.

Finding the kingdom of God calls for a powerful wish to have it: you've got to know what you want. Like someone who finds a treasure hidden in a field. He doesn't just sigh, "What a pity it isn't my field." He goes off and makes sure it is his field. He sells everything he owns to raise the price of that field.

The parables of Jesus, the little pictures he painted of the way God's kingdom comes, focus attention on the process rather than the result. People then, as now, felt that the power of God was so great, and their own significance so little, that they could only wait until God saw fit to stretch out his hand and establish his rule in the world. If God bided his time, who were they to question it, but they could live in hope of that surely great day when God would act. Then their waiting would be over and the kingdom would be established on earth.

But Jesus' teaching engaged them in the process. The coming of the kingdom was something happening, and the process was as momentous as the outcome. It was the power and the work of God to bring about the kingdom, but they would be part of that bringing about, living thru it, responding to it, even taking action within it. They would receive it, recognise it, spread the news of it and grow in it – and all this would be matter of eternal significance, an act of everlasting judgement.

Jesus' teaching turns us away from the passive expectation of the kingdom, without turning us into any illusory notion of building the kingdom of God ourselves. It is and can only be the work of God. It remains the kingdom of heaven, a kingdom come from far beyond our reach, but its coming engages us, stirs us to action, to the most vigorous and lively action sweeping up everything else that might be ours into one passionate commitment to the rule of God.

With the kingdom of heaven, it's like a pearl merchant. He's a rich man. He's seen and owned some fine pearls in his time; but one day he is shown a pearl whose value is beyond them all. He knows. He's a connoisseur. Without another thought, he goes and sells everything he owns, to buy that pearl. All his life up to then, all his great bargains and successful deals; all his experience and the money it has brought him. He gives it all to purchase and to own this one pearl which is worth more than everything.