

**May I speak in the name of the living God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

The gardeners amongst you will know and immediately relate to the wisdom of Jesus' words in the parable of the wheat and tares in our Gospel passage today.

One year, I remember planting some perpetual spinach in my vegetable plot. After a week or so, green shoots began to break through the soil. It was not long, however, before the green shoots of a variety of weeds also began to spring up alongside them.

It would have been very tempting to want to go out there, and immediately start pulling up what appeared to be the weeds.

However, it would have been very difficult in the early stages of growth to ensure that I was pulling up only the weeds. Telling a young spinach leaf from that of a weed is not easy.

The young spinach plants did not have deep and established roots, and so it would have been very easy to damage them at the same time as pulling up the weeds.

And so I have had to wait patiently, until, the spinach was large enough, to see clearly the distinctive shape of the leaves, and know without any doubt which were which. And until, the roots of the young plants were sufficiently deep, to ensure that they were not damaged by pulling up the weeds.

In likening the kingdom of God, to wheat growing amongst weeds, Jesus is teaching us, that we need to be patient.

It is very tempting in our enthusiasm as Christians to want to change the world over night. To be able to instantly root out that which we know to be bad, so that all that is left, is that which is of God's will.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could take away all the crime.

If we could root out every example of selfishness and greed.

If we could take away all conflict and war.

If we could root out the inequalities in the distribution of the world's resources.

And in doing so, leave space for only that which is good – the acts of love, kindness, generosity and peace that reflect God's love and goodness.

The world would certainly be a different place – a place that reflected more fully the values of God's kingdom.

But, Jesus says we need to be patient. God knows the right time, and the right way in which to bring this about.

There is so much that is bad in the life of our world at this time, that taking away everything that is bad, would destabilise things in a way that could be damaging to that which is good.

To take just a few examples:

- if we believed that we should all live as pacifists, upholding that all arms factories should be closed down – hundred's of thousands of people would be put out of work, threatening the livelihoods of many families.
- If we took the view that we must only use renewable fuels – this would mean a drying up of demand for oil, which would destabilise the politics of the Arab world, creating tensions and conflicts that could lead to war.

- If we decided that we were going to boycott all good produced in every country, where we believed there to be an unjust leadership - the ones who would suffer most would be the poorest and most vulnerable in the community.

This might all sound a little helpless.

Do we just turn a blind eye?

Do we simply accept these things and say that there is nothing we can do?

Jesus says that we need to be patient – not passive – there is a world of difference between the two.

To be passive, is to accept things as they are, and allow things to happen around us.

To be patient, it about being ready to act at the right time, in the right way, so as to be ultimately effective in growing God's kingdom.

We know, that we can't take away all the weapons of war overnight. But, we can be ready in our own lives to challenge the attitudes and values that lead to conflict.

Everywhere, that we see a prejudice, or a barrier that has been put up by fear or suspicion, we can seek to be bridge builders, who open up the way to reconciliation and peace.

Everywhere we see a fear of difference, we can be those who open the eyes of others to the common humanity that we share.

We can be those who are willing to forgive, when someone has wronged us and acknowledges it.

In so many ways, patiently speaking up for the values of God's kingdom, we can gradually help to diminish the need for weapons to protect us - for our best defence comes not through the threat of destruction, but through growing a spirit of openness and trust.

We know that we can't stop pollution, or the effects of climate change overnight. However, we can be ready in our own lives to challenge the attitudes and values that deny our responsibility as stewards of God's creation.

Every time, we see a light that has been left on unnecessarily, we can turn it off.

Every time, we are tempted to make an unnecessary journey in the car, we can think again, and walk, or cycle, or use the bus instead.

Every time, we see paper, or other resources wasted, we can question and challenge in the hope that the need for conservation is taken to heart.

In so many ways, we can patiently put into practice the principles of effective stewardship, so that others see and want to share in doing their bit to help save the environment.

We know, that we cannot root out every unjust regime in the world.

We can, however, encourage those with power and influence to take the issues seriously and speak up on behalf of those who are oppressed.

We can hold all these situations before God in prayer, knowing that he is indeed the one ultimately in control, and trusting that he will in the right way, and at the right time, act to heal and restore the most difficult of situations.

In many different ways, we can patiently express our desire for justice in the world and show our solidarity with those who are oppressed in such a way that it ultimately makes oppression an unacceptable form of government.

In all these ways, then, we can patiently live in a world that we know is imperfect, showing the way in which the distinctive life of the Christian can slowly, but surely root out all that which is bad, and allow the values of God's Kingdom to grow.

I would like to illustrate this with the story of Graham, a young man living and working in East Belfast.

Northern Ireland has over a generation or more lived with the ongoing effects of sectarian violence and crime. Although the Northern Ireland Power Sharing arrangements set up through the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, opened up a way to peace and reconciliation – things have did not chang over night. Old attitudes, prejudices and fears take a long time to overcome. There are still families scarred by the conflict that literally tore communities apart over a 30 year period.

East Belfast, is somewhere that the effects of the conflicts were felt the greatest, with many children living in very unstable homes, and whose fathers have been in and out of prison many times.

Not long after the 1998 Agreement, a young man called Graham, was asked by his local church to set up a youth programme for the teenagers whose lives had been marred by the years of violence.

More than this, he was asked to go and live in a flat, right in the heart of the community. It would have been no good simply going in for the evening, and then going back to a leafy suburb after the club.

Graham agreed. The flat that he moved into was one which had been broken into and wrecked many times.

Despite this, he established a base and found a venue for the club.

He was determined that however difficult it was, he would not exclude anyone. The teenagers that he was working with were frequently excluded from school and many other youth activities because of their bad behaviour. He wanted the club to be somewhere that they could always come to.

However, there was one lad who was particularly difficult. Most of the lads had fathers who had been in prison. There was a kind of pecking order according to how senior the father had been in the paramilitary ranks.

On one particular night, this lad, was so difficult, that Graham reluctantly had to say to him – “I’m sorry, I’ll have to ban you from the club for the rest of the night. You can come again tomorrow, but you can’t stay tonight.

As he was leaving, the lad said to Graham, “You’ve had it now. I’m going to tell my dad and your life won’t be worth living.”

There was a hushed silence around the hall. This lad was the son of the hardest and toughest paramilitary guy. Everyone agreed that this was definitely bad news...

10 minutes later, the lad's father arrived at the hall. Taller than I am, certainly much heavier, and a whole lot tougher than I am. Graham wondered what was going to happen...

The lad's father said, "I just wanted to come and say thank you for what you are doing with the lads. You're doing a great job."

I think this story says it all. It is putting into practice what Jesus tells us in the parable of the wheat and the tares.

Jesus tells us to be patient - not passive, and to live in a world that we know is imperfect, showing the way in which the distinctive life of the Christian can slowly, but surely root out all that which is bad, so that even lads like that boy in the Belfast youth club can share in the harvest of God's kingdom. Amen.