

If you'd come to Broughton to visit us last year you may have been dismayed by the strips of black plastic lining both sides of our driveway. Not an attractive greeting. Our intention was to smother the weeds and kill off the roots before giving the borders a complete makeover. Early November, a landscape gardener came with exciting plans and plants. April brought vibrant bulbs; May anemones and purple alliums. June the roses began to bloom. As the borders became more dense and colourful so appeared additional growth that didn't seem to be in the planting scheme. In amongst them were dreaded weeds. Yes I can recognise nettles and dandelions and could root them out; but there were some more delicate, purple and white blending in with the costly new planting. What to do with them? Pull them up? Risking losing some of the new plants. I was cross because I thought the black plastic had put paid to the weeds once and for all. In a mad moment, feeling particularly grouchy, I suggested that an envious neighbour had perhaps thrown all their weeds over the wall. Of course they hadn't. Weeds arrive on the wind or with the help of the birds. Essentially this is the dilemma for the farmer in this parable Jesus told about the weeds sown by the enemy amongst the healthy wheat. Root them out say the helpers. No says the farmer, be patient, allow them to grow together until the harvest. Then it will be possible to identify and separate them easily and get rid of them.

Various names are given to the weeds in different translations; thistles or tares or dandelion. Jesus' listeners, living in the countryside would know immediately that the seed sown by the devil, the weeds, look in its early stages just like wheat. Only at the end of its life cycle can you tell one from the other. The dandelion can be poisonous. It has deeper roots and if pulled out may bring the wheat along with it. This weed damages stunts and fails to produce life giving food. Wheat, on the other hand, produces essential food bread of life.

In the end, the farmer will separate one from the other.

This is another of Jesus parables about the kingdom, based on growing things. We can all see good and evil existing alongside each other in the world. How often are we asked in this or that terrible situation why doesn't God do something about it? Why don't the baddies get zapped before they can do more harm just like you can on an X Box game?

Because it would be so easy to root out the life-giving wheat with the poisonous weeds. It's not always possible to tell which are weeds and which is wheat. Be patient. Accept God's time. Accept his judgment. Only he can see into the souls of men and women and know the true state of their hearts. Be patient, wait. There will be a day of reckoning. But it's not for us to be judge and jury about who is wicked and who is not. That is the role of the Son of Man, of God in Jesus to assess. He who knows us intimately knows the true state of our soul. He provides us with opportunities to repent to turn towards his light.

The weeds can't ever become nourishing grains of wheat but fallen humanity can be redeemed. John Newton the slave trader, realised the evil he had engaged with, his penitence and new found faith immortalised in the hymn Amazing Grace. Nicki Cruz, an abused child, a violent New York gang leader up to his eyes in evil, found forgiveness and new life in Christ. Souls saved because the people of God prayed and reached out to those poisoned by the evil around them.

Our garden looks better than it ever did this year because we've able to spend more time on it. You can never be complacent. Weeds spring up everywhere, often in unexpected places. They remind us of our daily battles against evils without and within. This pandemic period has highlighted and reinforced many of the inequalities that exist within our society; poverty, poor living conditions, racial prejudice, abuse of power, neglect and exploitation of the vulnerable, marginalisation of those with mental health problems or physical disabilities. Look at the gospels. Same issues which confronted Jesus on a daily basis. Gospels show how he dealt with fraudulent tax collectors, outcast lepers, Samaritans, wealthy young ruler, a woman about to be stoned for adultery, people ravaged by demons, blind man at the roadside. He encountered each and everyone, however imperfect with a heart of compassion and a desire to bring wholeness to bring each and every one into his kingdom of love and light. Each had an opportunity to accept or

reject. We live in a fallen world. Evil won't disappear overnight . Be patient. Leave the judgment to God , to the son of Man. God will not allow us to be swallowed up by the weeds, if we turn to his light.

Within ourselves parts of our personality know are weed- ridden less than perfect. Stinging nettles of rumour and gossip, hurtful comments, dandelions of arrogance, pride and self-centeredness, Thankfully God is infinitely patient with us. Infinitely forgiving.

In Jesus he continues to meet us with his grace, uprooting the noxious weeds by his Spirit so that in his good time,we produce fruits which make the world a kinder and more loving place to live.

If you're in the garden this week as you pull up a weed or two, look at it before you relegate it to the compost. Consider how it might represent an aspect of your life or of society you want help to be rid of and pray about it.

My perfect cottage garden driveway will never exist. Weeds will inevitably arrive on the wind. Suffering and evil planted by the devil will exist alongside the kind and the loving until God calls time. But remember the words of Jesus just before he suffered all that evil could throw at him 'I have told you all this so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have troubles but take courage; I have conquered the world.' (John 16:33)