

Good news... of final justice (Matthew 13:24-30 & 13:36-43)

Good news! (Simon Rea)
Sunday Evening 20 January 2008

Barnabas slides 3
Statistics 3
Exile to Babylon
Persian Conquest
Greek Conquest
Maccabean revolt
Roman oppression

[No intro reading on ppt!]

12 "At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. 2 Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. 3 Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. 4 But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge."

5 Then I, Daniel, looked, and there before me stood two others, one on this bank of the river and one on the opposite bank. 6 One of them said

to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, "How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?"

7 The man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, lifted his right hand and his left hand toward heaven, and I heard him swear by him who lives forever, saying, "It will be for a time, times and half a time. When the power of the holy people has been finally broken, all these things will be completed."

Jesus first disciples were Jews and so, like all faithful Jews, they would have known the book of Daniel. The verses we have just heard would have been familiar to them and so they must have wondered when they wondered just "those things" would be completed, when the injustices of the past, the ones we saw on the screen and others besides, when those injustices would be put right. Like many first century Jews, they would have hoping God would send his Messiah in their lifetime and the waiting would be over. Justice would come, their people would be vindicated and their oppressors crushed. But then Jesus tells them a strange story, a parable that Carol H is going to come and read to us now:

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 root up 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.'" 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 sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons 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 fiery 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. He who has ears, let him hear.

He who has ears, let him hear - even if it is something he doesn't want to hear. He who has ears, let him hear - even if it is a 4 letter word no-one wants to hear.

There's a good case for saying that this parable and other parables around it about the mustard seed and the yeast, too are about 1 single 4 letter word which causes Christians as much frustration now as it did those first disciples all those years ago. 1 word. 4 letters. 1 big problem.

What is that word? And why is it still such a problem? This evening we'll be exploring these two questions and as we do that, we'll start to answer one of the most common and most difficult questions Christians can be asked: Why doesn't God do anything about the evil in the world?

So, what is the difficult word? WAIT. And why is it still such a problem? Because no-one wants to wait for justice.

These parables are all about waiting; and waiting is difficult. If you go to the continent, it won't be long before someone tells you about how polite the English are (when they're not drunk, that is!) because the English queue. English queuing is almost legendary, but let's face it, how many people actually enjoy standing in line in Tesco's, Sainsbury's or ASDA? Can anyone here today honestly say, and on heart, that you've never wished the other 6 people in front of you wouldn't just disappear? Or is there anyone here who hasn't secretly willed the microwave to hurry up and cook the ready-made instant meal in half the time?

If, like me, you have problems waiting for things like that, perhaps you can imagine how the Jews of Jesus' day must have felt must have felt. For so long they'd been oppressed by so many peoples: Persians, Greeks, Romans - and their own rulers weren't any better either! When would God sent the Messiah he had promised them in the scriptures? Why did they have to keep on waiting? And now think about the disciples. Remember, at least one of them - Simon, not Simon

Peter but the other one - was a Zealot - the first century equivalent of a Jewish freedom fighter or terrorist, depending on your point of view. The disciples had heard Jesus preach such challenging words about a new kingdom - the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven as Matthew calls it. They had seen him do powerful deeds of healing and exorcism, so that they must have been itching for him to get on and start it now. Their behaviour and their words later in the gospels show us just how impatient they could be!

They must have felt like the servants in the parable who want to go straight away into the cornfield and root out the weeds, perhaps singing from psalms as they did so: [Psalm 94]

2 Rise up, O Judge of the earth;
pay back to the proud what they deserve.
[Psalm 74]

10 How long will the enemy mock you, O
God?

Will the foe revile your name forever?

11 Why do you hold back your hand, your
right hand?

Take it from the folds of your garment
and destroy them!

How many of us here tonight don't feel the same about the injustices that are being committed daily about our brothers and sisters in the persecuted church of the 2/3s world or those in the government and the media who are responsible for rubbing the Christian faith?

This is where our parable kicks in. This is where Jesus' teaching stopped them in their tracks and where it stops us in our tracks and makes us think. You see not vengeance but patience is at the heart of this parable. Patience and waiting. Not just the waiting of the servants who have to stand by and watch, but the patience of God himself. God didn't, God doesn't enjoy the sight of a cornfield with weeds all over the place. But nor does he relish the thought of declaring harvest-time too soon, and destroying wheat along with weeds and so in the parable the farmer holds his servants back, because life is never that simple. In their zeal to get rid of the weeds, the servants would probably pull out as much wheat as they pulled out weeds.

I suppose I should make a confession here. And it's a confession which shows

on one level at least, how different Graham and I are: I am not a gardener. I do not even like gardening. I could not tell the difference between this [ppt wheat] and this [ppt weeds] - or is it vice versa [ppt; ppt] - even if there was a big sign telling which was which. Now, if it's so difficult to tell the difference between things we can see, like wheat and weeds, how much more difficult must it be to tell the difference between the hearts of men and women - even between the hearts of Christian men and women? The history of Rwanda which experienced one of the greatest revivals of the twentieth century and less than 70 years later one of the worst examples of jealousy and genocide is a painful reminder of the darkness that lurks even in the hearts of confessing evangelical Christians.

Many Jews of Jesus' time recognized this problem and spoke of God's compassion, about the way he was delaying his judgment so that more people could be saved at the end. Jesus, and Paul and other early Christian writers, took the same view. Somehow Jesus wanted his followers to live with the tension of

believing that the kingdom was arriving in and through his own work but that it would not fully arrive until he comes again at the end of the world. The kingdom and with it God's final justice is now and not yet. It is here but it is yet to come.

This can sometimes seem like a cop-out today, and no doubt it did in Jesus' day as well. Saying that God is delaying his final judgment might look a bit like saying that God is inactive or uncaring. But it's impossible to say that God didn't care when you look at the way Jesus lived and died for us. Remember Paul's words: (Ro 5:6-8) You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. God didn't wait for humanity to become perfect before he sent Jesus into this world to save sinners. And he didn't wait for us to become perfect before he sent Jesus into our lives. But he still wants

us to wait until his time is right before he comes again to bring his final justice into the world whenever that will be [Mark 13:32-33] And despite what false prophets have proclaimed over the centuries, Jesus himself tells us "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." So what we have to do is to "Be on guard! Be alert You do not know when that time will come."

What is the parable about? It's about waiting. Why is waiting difficult? Because we're only human and humans want to see justice. Well, we're not just only human in the sense of being intelligent animals. The Bible tells us that we were made in God's image (Gen 1:26), so perhaps that's why we long for justice, because God is just.

The parable tells us to wait but it also tells us that the waiting will one day have an end. The waiting will have an end because God is just. Again and again we see that in his dealings with the people of the Bible. God is just and that means he cannot let evil triumph, because evil is not just. There is evil in the world -

you just have to turn the TV or radio on to see it or hear about it. There is evil in the world and there will be a reckoning, there will be a final judgement and those who have been involved in that evil will be treated accordingly. God will put the world to rights. The Book of Revelation shows us how much of a struggle that will be because evil has no intention of coming quietly! Revelation doesn't give us a timetable for this but it does show us that God will triumph that he will judge the world, the living and the dead and that he will remake the world into the place it should always have been until people spoiled it. Perhaps that's why Revelation has always been such a comfort in those countries where Christians are being persecuted.

When today we long for God to act, to put the world to rights, we must remind ourselves that he has already done so, and that what we are now awaiting is the full outworking of those events. Of course we should continue to pray for his will to be done and for his kingdom to come. Of course we should continue to support our brothers and sisters in the

persecuted church but we must also wait patiently – even if waiting isn't what we want to do. We must wait, not like people in a dark room wondering if anyone will ever come with a lighted candle, but like people in early morning who know that the sun has risen and that it will reach the full brightness of midday. Until then, until we are with Jesus is that place where the streets shine with the glory of the lamb, let us do all we can to shine like stars through what we say and what we do to hold out the word of life to those who have not yet grasped how important it is.

Change end and add until then what can we do? Along with the persecuted church pray that wonderful, dangerous prayer from the end revelation. Maranatha. Even so Lord Jesus, come.