

Snapdragon or Weed?

A sermon by the Revd Judith Oliver for Sunday 19th July 2026

Wouldn't it be lovely if life were simple and straightforward? No problems or difficulties. No frustrations. No complications. If only life was like that, then maybe we could actually concentrate on this disciple ship stuff. This Kingdom business. But there's so much else getting in the way.

If we were plants we might say that it would be nice to be growing in a well manicured rose garden, with every weed banished, so that all we had to do was to grow and blossom in peace. Which reminds me of my snapdragons.

I guess it started about three summers ago when, in a burst of gardening enthusiasm, I decided to grow summer flowers for the pots from seed instead of buying seedlings. Success was mixed, to be fair. My nasturtiums came to nothing, for instance, but my snapdragons did OK. A lovely burst of colour that reminded me of my parents' garden when I was growing up. An old-fashioned flower, along with Michaelmas Daises and Dahlias. I didn't repeat the exercise the following years but to my absolute delight and surprise snapdragons still rebelliously and gloriously flowered. Not in the pot I planted in the first place, mind you, but just about anywhere else! I presume it came about because of self-seeding by my original crop, and from subsequent generations. Currently they are strutting their stuff from a crack in the decking and from the gaps between paving slabs. Beautiful.

I never know where they will pop up each summer and so I can never be sure in the Spring which green shoots are my liberated

snapdragons and which are weeds, so I dare not pull anything up until the buds form, only then will I know which are weeds and which are these joyful and persistent blooms. Which it seems, rather surprisingly really, to be what the Kingdom of God is like. You might think that God would establish a Kingdom where his seeds can thrive unhindered, like my first Snapdragon planting. A pot of their own. New compost. Weed free. But that's not the kind of Kingdom Jesus seems to be describing in our parable today... in fact the picture Jesus paints there is something altogether messier and more chaotic.

We heard the parable of the wheat and the tares..... or the parable of the weeds..... where good seed sown is infiltrated by bad seed, sown by the enemy, and the two grow side by side until the harvest time and only then are they separated, the wheat being gathered into the barn and the weeds to be burned.....

In this parable the field is the world, and in the world are both those who through faith are children of the Kingdom and those who in rejecting the word are children of evil. The harvest is the end of the age, the fulfilment of God's purposes, that wonderful time described in the reading we heard from Isaiah, and only at the end of the age will the wheat and the weeds be sorted. Judged by their response to the word of God.

This kingdom of God had already begun, but it was a kingdom of God quite different from what the people had expected. They had been led to expect, I think, that when God's kingdom came it literally would come with a vengeance and that God would at a stroke destroy the pagan nations and grind them down. Would unambiguously fill the earth with righteousness. This was the kind of coming of the kingdom people had expected, a kingdom free from any enemies of goodness, a kingdom more like a well-manicured rose garden where all weeds are banished... or even like a tidy pot of disciplined Snapdragons.

But instead, with Jesus, here is something new. Here is a new idea about the kingdom of God. Here is Jesus announcing that the kingdom is in fact at hand..... already begun..... in his own person, but not yet fully disclosed.

It was to point to the real nature of this coming of the kingdom of God that the parables of this thirteenth chapter of Matthew were told. We heard one of them this morning. We heard another last week, the Parable of the Sower. And the other parables which follow all illustrate something about this new idea of the kingdom of God..... it is like a mustard seed.... it like a precious and beautiful pearl..... it is like buried treasure.

All of them point to the hiddenness of God's purposes until the proper time to reveal them, of something begun but not yet completed, of something apparently insignificant and unimpressive which holds the promise of great things to follow, of now and 'not yet'.

The disciples were told through our parable that the coming of the kingdom in Jesus would not mean as they had thought, that those who did not believe would be immediately wiped out. The Church to be born at Pentecost would exist alongside the scribes and Pharisees and disbelievers and they would have to muddle along rubbing shoulders with them, being frustrated by them, being persecuted by them. It wouldn't be neat and clear cut, it would be untidy and messy, just like the good seed in the field all mixed up with the weeds. Only with the promise that, come the harvest, in the end it would matter whose side you were on.

We still are in such times, the now but not yet, the kingdom announced but not fully established. Rubbing along with the frustrations and difficulties and distractions that are part of our everyday lives. And sometimes it can indeed feel as though those difficulties and distractions are put there to spoil our attempts to do good and be good, as if they were put in our way, like the weeds of

the parable, by an enemy. But just as in Spring I dare not pull up anything green on the patio because I can't yet tell which will be Snapdragons and which are weeds, neither can we tell which of us or which situations and encounters will in the end prove to be the fruit of God's word and which are not. They grow together in a glorious chaos.

To our modern minds this parable can be hard to hear, because of its clear warning of judgement, and because of its linking of evil and wickedness with those who are not of the faithful.

But, in spite of this, I find it encouraging. Not because of the threat of judgement for those who do not believe.... I do find that very hard but because it paints a picture I recognise about what it feels like to be a disciple. Everything isn't clear cut. There are challenges all the time about why I should believe and about what I can believe, and life is often hard and it is often painful. My life is like the weed ridden patio with weeds and Snapdragons poking through side by side, not a neatly planted single variety pot, and it is in that messy reality that I try to follow the Lord Jesus.

Our lives are lived generally outside the weed free zone, where we are outnumbered, where there are competing attractions, where there are difficulties and frustrations and obstacles in our way as children of the kingdom of God. What happens here on Sundays *in* the 'weed-free-zone' serves only to equip us for that other task out there in the jungle of weeds.

I find it an encouraging parable first because it affirms our proper place in the world. Not just pulling ourselves apart in a holy huddle 'tut-tutting' at the wickedness of the world but accepting that out there is where we should be, as good seed growing as strong as we can. Drawing our strength from roots deep in God's word and the deep in the community of faith. Being sustained by God's love and God's life.

I find it an encouraging parable because it is realistic about the untidiness of our lives..... of the daily challenges to our integrity... of the grinding down of our energy through sadness or exhaustion..... of the thwarting of our best intentions..... of the loneliness of being the only one who stands for something..... it is realistic about the how frustrating discipleship can be and about how unpromising and far away the kingdom of God can seem..... and how messy life can be a lot of the time.

I find it encouraging because it affirms me as who I am where I am and who you are where you are. Good seed, doing its very best to grow tall and strong for God not only here but out there, doing what ever it is that we each do day by day and to know that ultimately it will matter which side we on... the side of good or the side of evil.

And so those distractions and frustrations and obstacles, those things that seem too worldly to have anything to do with what we do at church, well dealing with them is simply how it is to be in this time of 'now and not yet', engaging with them is what we are meant to be doing, because we have been told to expect to live out our faith not in a tidy pot, but in the field of the world, alongside all those troublesome weeds.

In this time of a kingdom begun but not yet fully realised what matters is not what we face but how we face it. Difficulties can be seen as opportunities. Obstacles can become challenges. Disappointments can become our teachers. If all is rooted and grounded in God all things will work for the good so that at the final harvest there will be among the mixed crop enough fruit from good seed to fill the barn.

And all the time the kingdom is near, breaking through the hiddenness here and there to surprise and delight us in little bursts of love and joy and peace, but mostly for now hidden from our sight.

Dear Lord your kingdom grows unseen.

Your kingdom works secretly and silently among those who love you.

Help us to be bold to carry your love out of this place into the rest of the week and into the other parts of who we are.

Help us to shine like the sun in dark places.

Help us to stand firm against the pressures to betray you or forget you.

Help us to pray for the coming of your kingdom, and to mean it.
Amen.