

What *is* darnel?

This simple question popped into my head as I read today's gospel during this past week. It proved to be a much more interesting and illuminating question to ask than I had expected. And we should never be afraid of asking such questions of the scripture we hear and receive, even of the parts we think we know well. There is always more to learn.

Back in my seminary days I got the gist that darnel was a pernicious weed, and left it at that. Google and Wikipedia were yet to be invented and further enquiry, had it even occurred to me, would have been effortful. Botany was not a section of the seminary library! Now, of course, one can research such things instantly on the computer.

Darnel goes by various other names, most of which encapsulate the idea of darnel being wheat's evil twin. Darnel is itself a rye-grass, and in the early stages of growth it is very hard to distinguish from true wheat. The weeding out that the servants in the parable wanted to do would have been a very skilled and laborious task, and would certainly have involved loss of some wheat; hence the owner's instruction to leave it until the harvest.

Darnel is often host to a fungus that produces a psychoactive neurotoxin that causes delirium, and even death, in humans. If too much of it gets in the harvest, and then into the flour, the whole lot is useless. In the time of Jesus, many jurisdictions treated darnel as notifiable plant; failure to control, misuse to bulk up the flour, or malicious spreading were legal matters and subject to penalty.

This would all have been common knowledge to Jesus' hearers. Jesus assumes we know this background before we start. So here we go...

We are very good at saying what we think *ought* to be done. I may describe a long conversation with my friend as 'putting the world to rights'. I may also have a go at telling God what He *ought* to do as well. Let's all sit down and have a cosy chat within the echo chamber of our own social circle where we are all so certain we know what *ought* to happen and who should be doing it.

In other words we all think we know exactly where the evil darnel is in the world and how to weed it out.

And God says no.

And we don't like it. We rave at him: why, why, why? Why do you stand by and let all this evil happen?

God is not being weak, or uncaring. The first reading from the book of Wisdom explains that God's strength is expressed in lenience and mildness, in 'the good hope that after sin you [God] will grant repentance.'

God desires all the good, and all the goodness to be saved. He will risk none of it for a quick-fix solution to rip out the darnel early. He also desires to maximise the chance and opportunity for repentance. We can pass ultimate judgement on no-one. Only God knows what and where the darnel is that must be separated out and destroyed. That is left to God and to God alone. And he chooses to wait until the harvest to do so.