Westlake Church Lausanne

The Problem of Evil and the Power of God
Matthew 13:24-43

In his book, *The Secular Age*, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor says that when it comes to faith, we live in a 'cross-pressured' age. And by that he means that whether you believe, or not, you feel cross pressures from the other side. That if you're an unbeliever, you're haunted by the transcendent, by those moments when you instinctively feel that there is more to life than this material world. And rather than the world being a closed system, if even for a moment, you feel like it's enchanted, and deep down you have this nagging doubt that scientific materialism, and rampant individualism, cannot answer the hauntings of your heart.

But not just unbelievers. Even believers feel this cross-pressure from unbelief. That there are times when this material world shakes your faith and you know, you understand why others don't believe. And you wonder yourself whether you're right to go on believing.

And one of the most common cross-pressures we feel is the fact of suffering and evil in the world. Now maybe that doesn't disturb the waters of your faith, but you don't have to chat to others for long, or if you have them, with your kids, to know that it is an issue for them or their friends: if God is good, and all powerful, i.e. if the God of the Bible *really* exists, why is there so much evil and suffering in the world? Because if he is good, and all-powerful, he would stop it. And the fact that he doesn't tells you that either he's not good, or he's not all-powerful, or he does not exist. So if unbelief is haunted by the transcendent, the enchantedness of the world, belief is haunted by the evil and suffering of the world.

And it's just that issue that Jesus confronts in the parable we've just read. Three points: The Problem of Evil; the Promise of Hope and the Power for Change.

The Problem of Evil
Now, what comes before this passage is Jesus telling the parable of the sower: that the kingdom of God is breaking into our world in life-transforming power now. But if you were there, and heard Jesus saying that, you might think, 'o sure, but if the kingdom of God has come in power why are we still being oppressed and humiliated by this other kingdom, the Roman empire? If God's rule and reign has broken in, if he's so powerful, why doesn't he do something about them?

Which is a first century version of our own problem of evil, isn't it? Where was God in the holocaust, or the Rwandan genocide? Why does he permit tsunamies and droughts and famines and floods? And where is he in my suffering? If God is good and all-powerful, maybe he should do something. Or maybe he isn't good and all powerful. Or maybe he just *isn't*.

And Jesus confronts that question head on. Verse 24, 'He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field." And by way of explanation, Jesus tells us, v38, "The field is the world." Literally, the cosmos, the created order, this sphere of our

existence. And the one who sows the good seed, he says, in v37, is "the Son of Man" – Jesus' favourite title for himself. And the field, he says in v24, is his. So here is Jesus stating, the field is mine, the world is mine, I'm the cosmic Lord. And the seed that he sows in the field is good seed. And if you can hear it, there's an echo of Genesis, and how God creates the world, the cosmos, and says, 'it's very good.'

But think about that. Think about standing back and looking at the world and saying it's good, or it's not good. You see, if there is no God, why is evil and the suffering in the world – a not good world - a problem? If there is no God, if there is no ultimate standard of what's good, no ultimate standard of beauty, or wholeness, or health, or morality, or human thriving, why is evil and the brokenness of the world a problem? If there is no God, it's not a problem, it's just a fact. And yet deep down you know it's a problem, you know the world is not as it should be. So, as Charles Taylor would put it, whilst as a believer you're haunted by suffering, if you're an unbeliever you're haunted by the knowledge that this world should be good and that suffering and evil are alien invaders.

And yet, our blaming of God, our pointing the finger at him, and saying 'if he were good and all powerful he would do something', also says something, doesn't it? It tells us that instinctively we know that ultimately only he can fix it. We want to blame him for the mess, but in doing so we recognise our impotence and his omnipotence. We recognise what Jesus says in the parable, that he's the Lord of the Cosmos. So, once again, we're haunted by this knowledge that we need a solution from outside ourselves - that the help our world needs must come from another world.

And both of those things - the fact that the world is not as it should be, and that God is the answer - is what Jesus is teaching us through this parable. He tells us that whilst the farmer sows good seed, the sons of the kingdom, Jesus calls them, those whose lives are transformed by the message of the Kingdom, there is an enemy, there is such a thing as evil, personalised evil, and v25 he "came and sowed weeds among the wheat."

Now, in the UK, the weed that every gardener dreads is Japanese bindweed – because it will take over your garden and slowly kill it. But if you were a first century farmer, it wasn't Japanese bindweed you feared, it was *zizania*, or *darnel* – the weed Jesus talks about here. And the problem with *zizania* is that when it first sprouts it's indistinguishable from wheat. It's only as it matures, and the wheat begins to develop buds of grain that you realise – hey, that's not wheat, that's *zizania*. And in Jesus' parable, the workers realise the field is full of the stuff. The problem is, that by the time you notice it, the roots of the *zizania* are intertwined with that of the wheat. Try and pull out all the *zizania*, and you'll have no wheat left.

So when Jesus uses *zizania* as a picture, he's not burying his head in the ground, is he? Jesus gets it. He knows that evil is endemic in the world, that it's in the very roots, the soil, of our human condition, it's entwined in our human existence. Which is why, when the workers ask the farmer if they should pull up the weeds, he says 'no'. You see, they want to root out the weeds – just like you and I look at the world and want to root out the evil. But what do we think when we think like that? We tend to think that if only we could root out this type of person, or that specific problem, the world would be a better place; that if we rooted out the selfish rich, or the lazy poor, we could root out poverty; that if we could only root out the religious, or the irreligious, we could root out conflict. That if we could only root out the politically or morally liberal, or conservative, we could fix our broken politics. Sort out these people, pull up those weeds and the field will be good again. But Jesus knows better. He knows that the problem goes much deeper, it's much more intertwined, and politics and economics and education alone can never solve it – because the roots of the problem of evil stretch down to our own hearts.

The Russian author and dissident, Alexander Solzhenitsyn spent years in the forced labour camps of the Soviet Union. And he witnessed both the best and the worst of humanity – the sons of the kingdom, and the sons of evil one. And yet, having seen and experienced evil face to face, in his book the *Gulag Archipelago*, he wrote, "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?' You see, Solzhenitsyn understood what Jesus is saying there, that none of us is immune, or free, of the entangling roots of evil. We're all caught up in it.

So, if God were to intervene now, none of us would survive. Years ago I heard a preacher talking about Moses striking the rock with his rod and crying out 'must I bring water out of this rock for you rebels?' And God rebuked Moses for not honouring him as holy before the people, for not honouring his character before them. But what did Moses say that failed to honour God? 'Must I bring water out of this rock for you rebels?' How does that fail to honour God's character? Well, as the preacher said, if God were not merciful to rebels, this room would be strangely empty.

And through this parable, Jesus tells us that God will one day do something about the problem of evil in the world, and he will remove evil and judge and punish those who are evil. Verse 41, "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace." And yet, God delays that day – not because he is not good, but because he is good. And his patience is not a sign of his weakness but of his grace. As the apostle Peter writes, 'The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should

perish, but that all should reach repentance' (2 Peter 3:9). So why does God delay ending this world's suffering? To minimise eternal suffering - so that as many might be saved as possible.

But the final outcome Jesus says, will be a cosmos remade, where, v43, "The righteous will shine like the sun, in the kingdom of their father."

But what about in the meantime, while we wait? Is there no hope for change now?

The Promise of Hope

Now, you don't have to be an obstetrician to marvel at how a baby grows inside its mum, do you? How it starts out as a fertilized egg, and then starts dividing, and growing. And you see the early ultrasound scans and you can tell something's there, but that's about it, but how within a few weeks it's obviously a baby, and it's still growing, and then the scans begin to show you her face, and his little fingers, and you think this is amazing, and seemingly from nothing.

Or think about the world of business. Isn't there something inspiring about stories of small to big success? Like Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak and Apple, and how it all began in a computer club for geeks and is now this staggeringly successful corporation. It's almost like a fairy tale.

And in the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus says that's just how it is with the kingdom of God. Verse 31-32, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds." So small you can barely see it. And yet, Jesus says, v32, that seed "When it has grown is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree." And he's not exaggerating. The mustard seed could grow into a bush anywhere between 2-4m high. It goes from this tiny speck, into this massive thing. And Jesus' point is, that though the kingdom is sown in a world where the roots of evil entangle everything, the kingdom – the rule and reign of God - will thrive and grow.

Now, small to big might sound inspiring to us, but that's not how Jesus' Jewish audience would have seen it with the Kingdom of God. The idea of God's kingdom starting small would have been less inspiring and more startling, maybe even shocking – because they were thinking of God's kingdom coming in mighty, enemy-crushing power. And here is Jesus saying, no, it comes as a seed, as something seemingly insignificant, and then, it grows.

And yet that's exactly what did happen. Imagine the pre-Christian world – think of Jesus the man, he's just a carpenter, in the back-waters of the Roman empire. Think of his first disciples – insignificant, unknown men, with not a single MBA between them. And in comparison to the Empire, in comparison to the fabulous temples and worship of the Greek gods or of the Emperor himself, they were

nothing, and their movement was nothing. They stood no chance. And yet, that tiny, insignificant kingdom seed grew and overturned them all.

You see, there is something fundamentally subversive in Jesus using a mustard seed as a picture of the kingdom, isn't there? In Jesus' time, the mustard plant was seen as something of a pest. Older, more experienced gardeners would warn the young-uns about sowing it in their garden – precisely because it would grow into this massive bush and take over your vegetable patch. And the kingdom of God has just that kind of subversive power. But a subversive power for good - for overturning the world order as you know it.

You see, look at v32, and what Jesus says about the birds: that mustard seed "becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." And Ezekiel and Daniel, two Old Testament prophets, use the image of a tree as an image of earthly empires. And birds come and land in those trees – and those birds represent peoples and nations finding protection in those empires. So when Jesus talks of birds nesting in the branches of the mustard tree, he's talking about nations and peoples - foreigners and gentiles - people like you and me, finding rest and refuge in the kingdom of God. Which is great, because it's people like us, but for Jesus' original audience it would have been people *un*like them. It would mean outsiders, gentiles, Greeks, Romans, the very people who represented what was wrong with the world. The very people they would have wanted to see uprooted and thrown in the fire.

And that's why the kingdom's subversive – because rather than it dividing people along racial or ethnic or political lines – and if only we could root these ones out the world would be a better place, it becomes a place where all of us, whatever our background, and whatever our past, can come find rest and refuge.

But it's not just subversive and it's not just incredible in the scale of its growth, the kingdom also transforms the world as we know it: v33, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."

Now, when I was a teenager my mother found a packet of coconut flakes at the back of the cupboard. And despite the fact that it was years past the sell-by date, she decided to make some coconut muffins with it. Except the coconut was off – it was rancid – and one bite was enough to leave you spitting the stuff out. So we decided to feed the whole batch to the birds in the garden and scattered them around across the lawn. Except, they were so terrible, not even the birds wanted them, so a few days later my brother and I had to go out and pick them all up again. Or, there was the time a couple of years ago, when we made some Christmas mince pies, except one of us misread the recipe and instead of adding three *tea*spoons of salt to the pastry added three *table*spoons of salt. Which went unnoticed until we all took our first bite and you feel like you're eating salt cakes!

Now, less dramatic than those, is when Su's baked some bread, but the yeast is old, and it's lost its power, and the bread comes out heavy and solid.

But when the yeast is new, and fresh, it has an incredible effect on the bread, doesn't it. It does the opposite of rancid coconut, or overdoses of salt, ruining it. One pinch and the whole loaf rises. And Jesus says that's what the kingdom of God is like – it transforms, it changes things, and it does so for good. And not just for individuals. You see, look at the quantity of flour Jesus talks about: 3 measures. Apparently, that's between 20-40 litres of flour. Now I'm no baker, but apparently that's enough flour to bake bread for a hundred people, for an entire village.

And that is what the kingdom does, Jesus says. It is sown in an evil world but it spreads its positive influence in that world, permeating individual lives, and families and villages and cities and nations. Transforming lives, building schools and hospitals. Caring for the unborn and the dying. Feeding the hungry. Reaching out to the marginalised and the trafficked and the refugee. Spreading the gospel in word and deed. And keeping on doing it until the day when God finally brings evil to an end.

But how does the kingdom do that? And how can you be a part of that?

The Power for Change

Almost as an aside, Matthew tells us why Jesus taught in parables, v35, 'This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world." And he's quoting from Psalm 78, where the psalmist Asaph tells story after story of how God has saved his people Israel, even when they didn't deserve it. And Matthew's saying that that's exactly what's going on now: that in Jesus' life and teaching, and ultimately in his death and resurrection, God has once more intervened to rescue and save his people.

You see, did you notice how in our reading from 1 Corinthians 15, Paul describes Jesus' resurrection as the first-fruits of harvest? And so, whilst the parable of the wheat and weeds tells us that there is going to be a harvest, when God finally addresses the problem of evil, God has already begun to make everything new. And the resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of the overturning of evil, and bringing of life from the dead.

You see, the prophet Isaiah tells us that the messiah would come, but when he came, he would not be as expected: he would be like a young plant, growing out of dry ground, with no beauty or majesty that we would desire him. But he would be despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And Jesus, the Son of God, humbled himself and entered our broken world, he was sown into our world of suffering. And he didn't just see suffering far off, the problem of evil wasn't just some philosophical puzzle for him, like some modern-day elite,

looking on from the ivory tower of heaven. He experienced it, he lived it. In his infancy, he was a refugee from a corrupt regime. As an adult he was poor and homeless. And he was betrayed and abused and humiliated and tortured. So he knows what it is to suffer. More than that, he drank the cup of our sin. And at the cross he took all of our evil upon himself, and he absorbed the wrath of God that we deserve. And he was thrown into the fire of judgement for us.

And it was there, at the cross, as he cried out, 'it is finished!' and it was as he rose again that first Easter Sunday morning, that he defeated evil and broke its power. And it's Jesus dying for you, and rising for you, the first-fruits of the harvest, that gives you the power, through his Holy Spirit, to live and work for kingdom transformation now.

You see, the crucifixion of the Son of God undermines any misty-eyed view we might have of the world, doesn't it? It tells you this is how bad the world really is. It makes you clearheaded about how unjust and full of suffering the world is. But rather than seeing other people as the problem, and that making you proud, the cross profoundly humbles you – because you know that Jesus hung there for your sin. It was your hands that drove in the nails, and you know that the battle line of evil runs through every heart – including yours.

But as well as humbling you, the gospel also lifts you up. As well as making you clearheaded it also fills you with hope - an enduring, evil-defeating, death-defying, resurrection hope - because you know that in the resurrection of the Son of God the tide has turned. You know Jesus is the first-fruits of the new world God is making, that better is to come. And that will make you bold and courageous to fight against injustice, and to share the good news of the kingdom, because you know the power of the mustard seed and of the leaven. Sure it starts small, but no one is excluded, and nothing can stand in the way of its life-transforming, world-changing power.