

23 July 2023

Genesis 28:10-19a  
Romans 8:12-25  
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Jerry stabbed the fork into the garden bed, stamped his foot on its shoulder to work it deeper in, and grunted as he levered up the clump of couch that had invaded and become established during the many weeks that other tasks had taken his attention away from maintaining the garden. Frustratingly, only part of the clump came up in that first go: the knotted roots holding firmly to the lumpy soil. He jabbed the fork in again and again, the exertion and violence being both somewhat cathartic and rather expressive of his general mood.

“Why?” he grunted, the words spat out in time with his efforts. “Why ... doesn’t ... God ... do ... something?!”<sup>1</sup>

Three dead in an apparently random and unprovoked shooting in Auckland. Almost every day another mass shooting event in the US<sup>2</sup>: such a terrible waste of innocent lives. The war for Ukraine that grinds on and on to who-knows-what end, and in Sudan where different tribes fight for the right to rule a people that they are gradually destroying ... And now his own granddaughter having to receive counselling after being found to have been self-harming as a response to cyber-bullying.

Why doesn’t God answer? Why doesn’t God step in and stop it? Why doesn’t he just get rid of all the evil people, all the evil thoughts and actions?

Jerry stabbed the fork into the next bit of couch, a few hot tears of anger and powerlessness making tracks through the earthy dust on his cheeks. It was his granddaughter’s case that made this all so personal and real, made it well up and over in anger and hatred towards those bullies. But Jerry too felt, deep down, the injustice of the other bigger, but more remote, situations that were also part of his case against God.

His thoughts, and his energetic work in the garden, were brought up short by a nearby voice: “God doesn’t do anything because God’s not there.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Wright, *Matthew*, p. 168

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting>

It was his neighbour, whose work in his own garden had gradually brought him up close to the boundary fence. Arthur, nicknamed Merlin on account of his long wispy grey beard, was well-known to Jerry, as were his atheistic views. Merlin had spoken cheekily: he knew well-enough Jerry was a church-goer, but it was not until Jerry turned and straightened up, and he saw the tear-stained face, that he realised something serious was up. Merlin was not inconsiderate or lacking in compassion so he apologised for his haste and asked what was wrong. Jerry filled him in on his granddaughter.

Merlin expressed his concern for Jerry's granddaughter; he was empathetic. "So it all begs the question of whether this God of yours is real or not, does it?" he asked quietly, aware that this would be a big thing for Jerry.

"No, actually, it doesn't really", replied Jerry. "Just because someone doesn't respond or act in the way one expects or hopes for doesn't mean they don't exist or that they don't care. And, oddly enough, it is the fact God *does* exist, and that he has the character he does, that actually allows me to express this hurt and disappointment and longing." He inwardly smiled an ironic smile: perhaps it wasn't for nothing that his birth mother had given him the name Jeremiah.

Merlin's landline had begun to ring, and he turned to head indoors. "By the way," he called over his shoulder, "you've dug up some bulbs in that lot."

Jerry looked down in surprise at the pile of weeds at his feet. Sure enough, entangled in the roots of the couch were quite a number of small bulbs, their leaf blades lost among the similar blades of the couch. "Damn it!" exclaimed Jerry. He dropped to his knees and started laboriously sorting: he wanted to replant the bulbs as soon as possible. At least at the root and bulb level it was easy enough to distinguish what was desired from what was not, whereas above the surface it had been quite difficult to discern the difference.

As he sorted – the little pile of bulbs growing beside him – his thoughts went back to the issues that had been vexing him before Merlin's interruption. What he was doing right now – *sorting* – that was exactly what God needed to be doing: sorting

things out, sorting people out, weeding out the bad and getting rid of it ... like the couch that was destined for a backyard fire. All the evil people – all the tyrants, all the warmongers, all the murderers, blackmailers, thieves, ... yes, and the cyber bullies too ... needed to be weeded out and got rid of, destroyed for good. Then there would be peace and justice and an environment in which he, and his granddaughter, and all could flourish and enjoy fullness of life.

He started carefully replanting the bulbs in the weeded section of the bed. As he turned over the soil with his trowel he found a few other small bulbs coming to the surface: these had no leaf blade yet. He started to replant them too. But then he stopped: he found himself looking at one of these small bulbs sitting in the palm his hand. What kind of bulb was it? He couldn't tell. What kind of flower would it produce? He didn't know. And besides some weeds grow from bulbs. And if these little bulbs were in fact weeds as well, shouldn't he clear them out of the bed before planting the desirable bulbs, rather than taking the risk that they might become entangled again by something unwanted?

He remained on his garden kneeler, staring at that little bulb and the maybe/maybe-not weeded bed into which he might plant it. His mind had turned again to his earlier complaint, various threads of thought swirling around.

If evil were to be rooted out, it needed to be *all of it* rooted out – a clean garden bed, as it were, so the precious flowers of good lives could never again become entangled by evil and its effects.

He thought how fortunate it was that it was only bulbs that he'd mistakenly uprooted with the couch: a different plant with a more delicate structure might not have been able to be replanted with any hope for growth and blooming. If an error was made with the kind of judgement he had in mind for evil-doers, then there would be no going back.

And what about the possibility of change? What if the apparently good bulb turns out to be bad? What if the bulb assumed to be a weed turns out produce a lovely flower?

That thought took Jerry back to his own past, to his chaotic upbringing and the long period in his life when he'd been heading in quite the wrong direction. It's just as

well I wasn't weeded out back then, he reflected; I wouldn't have had the chance to discover Jesus and start to get my life back on the right track.

He sighed. "Right track" was relative. There was still much in his life that was far from perfect; when he thought about it honestly, there were many small ways in which he sided with evil. There was murder in his heart – and, at least briefly, entertained in his mind – when he thought about his granddaughter's bullies. His tongue could be cutting and hurtful at times. Sometimes his courage failed and he neglected to stand up for those who were being picked on. And there were topics he would steer away from, even with his wife, lest he risk unravelling a web of historic small untruths.

He supposed he wasn't unique in this even among faithful Christians: he knew a little about one or two fellow parishioners, or had seen aspects of their behaviour, that indicated that even the church was not a pure weed-free bed.

The ache in his knees brought him out of his reverie. He levered himself to his feet to stretch, reaching quickly for steadying support from the fork while his head cleared after the fog of the sudden drop in blood pressure.

He glanced along at the un-weeded section of bed. I guess that's what the world's like, he thought: a mixture of good and evil, all flourishing mingled in together. Good and bad, constructive and destructive, helpful and harmful all growing up alongside each other,<sup>3</sup> interacting with one another, affecting one another for both good and ill. That's part of the challenge of this life, as we who are children of God and counted good, seeking to do good for and in the world, live alongside those who will be ultimately found to be children of something or someone else. That's the hard part, as we still feel the choking effects of the weeds we share life's bed with.

Jerry looked at the weeded part. When he got the rest of those bulbs in it would have been a good afternoon's work, a job well done.

---

<sup>3</sup> Carroll "Commentary"

Well, a job well done on the surface and for now, at least. But he would not know what his work had accomplished until all the bulbs flowered and revealed themselves for what they truly were. Thank goodness I'm only dealing with plants and bulbs, he thought, rather than humankind and life and death. My mistakes here have no lasting significance, but what I'm asking of God is of eternal consequence.

He thought back to his murderous thoughts about the cyber bullies. In a way, he supposed, this really made him no different from the zealots and fanatics around the world who execute summary judgement on those they believe are on the wrong side of who- or what-ever their god is. He recalled something he'd read from Aldous Huxley:

Those who crusade, not *for* God in themselves, but *against* the devil in others, never succeed in making the world better, but leave it either as it was, or sometimes even perceptibly worse than it was, before the crusade began. By thinking primarily of evil we tend, however excellent our intentions, to create occasions for evil to manifest itself.<sup>4</sup>

The job of final sorting out had better be done by God, by someone distinct from those subject to evaluation, for good or ill; someone able to judge with perfect wisdom and justice; someone whose loves his creation and wants it to have fullness of life in the age to come.

Jerry sharply drew in his breath as he realised that the kind of justice he hoped for had to be wise and subtle enough to deal with and root out evil in all its forms, putting it to death, while leaving open the possibility of life for those who, like himself, like his fellows Christians, who had opted for the side of good in Jesus, but still sometimes did and thought things that sided with evil. Good and bad, constructive and destructive, helpful and harmful all growing up, not only all around us but also within us – within the church community and within myself.

He looked down at the garden bed again. It is hardly an Eden, he thought ruefully. It had goodness within it and planted into it, but it was far from a totally flourishing perfection. There were pests and diseases in there, along with the plants – both

---

<sup>4</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Devils of Loudun*, cited in Dale Windows on Matthew

weeds and flowers. And there was a constant battle between these various forces going on. Was it too, in some way, crying out for God to do something?

He had a sudden thought: a piece of the Bible came to mind. Romans, was it? Something about the whole creation groaning?

Perhaps there was something in that: the whole of creation waiting for the right time when God will put everything right, when God will complete what he has begun in Jesus, restoring the whole of creation to its intended perfection and good purpose at the same time as dealing with all the evil experienced by, and found within, humankind.

Waiting for the *right time*, Jerry mused. Perhaps God is biding his time, holding off until more lives can be transformed – so that the final harvest will be as full as it possibly can be.

So for now, patience. And not just patience, but courage and vision that comes from recognising that it's not all futile and hopeless – because God's perfect justice will be done.

Oh! And maybe here we are gardeners and workers too. If God is working towards putting the world to rights, perhaps we have a role to play now in ensuring that the harvest is as large as possible. Maybe through our words and actions, through goodness, peace-making and justice-seeking, through talking about God's character and purpose for the world, we have a role in helping people choose to be on the right side.

Jerry squinted against the sunlight in his eyes, now coming at an angle under the canopy of the oak tree. The afternoon was drawing on to a close. I'll just get the rest of these bulbs in, he thought, and then I'll grab a couple of brews and go over to see Merlin. Jerry wondered what kind of "God" Merlin did not believe in: he might be interested to hear about a God who really is *doing something*.

**Sources:**

- Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, [Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament], Zondervan, 2010
- John T Carroll, "Commentary on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16/commentary-on-matthew-1324-30-36-43-6>
- Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, SPCK, 2002/2004
- Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans, Part 1, chapters 1-8*, SPCK, 2004
- Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections: Year A*, SPCK, 2004
- Tom Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays: Year A*, SPCK, 2001
- Ronald W Dale, *Windows on Matthew: an anthology to amplify the Revised Common Lectionary Gospel readings for Year A*, Kevin Mayhew, 1998