

Weeds...

Richard Dawson

14 November 2010

Genesis 3¹¹⁻¹⁹ / Romans 7¹⁴⁻²⁵ /

In 2005 Landcare Research New Zealand released a field-guide on the biological control of weeds in New Zealand. The opening paragraph of that report is enlightening to say the least. It reads like this...

“Alien weeds, including exotic grasses, shrubs, vines and trees, pose a serious and increasing threat to all of New Zealand’s ecosystems. Unless current control is improved more than 575 000 ha of high priority conservation land will soon be threatened by weeds. In the longer term, the ecosystem-altering effects of invasive plants will have serious impacts on New Zealand’s indigenous biodiversity and productive sectors, by altering hydrological regimes, disturbing the flow of energy and nutrients, and changing the structure and composition of native communities.

The financial cost of weeds is also huge. For example, in 1982 the cost of pastoral weeds alone (in terms of production losses plus weed control expenditure) was estimated to be \$393 million per annum, which equates to about \$1.1 billion today.”

Applied to the dairy industry alone one report estimated the cost in terms of lost production and of control methods of just one weed – the giant buttercup – to be in the vicinity of \$118 million in the 1999-2000 year alone.

For the farmer the price of living with weeds is quite simply one of constant vigilance and unceasing toil. Pastures never stay pure. Day by day, year by year they become infested with less productive and yet more vigorous species which strangle the grasses and clovers and compete vigorously for space. Sometimes the species planted simply never get a chance. Weeds seeds dormant in the ground in huge numbers germinate first when the soil is worked up to produce the ideal environment for the species which are desired. The desired species are so often choked by the tide of weeds which also find such conditions ideal. Weeds are, simply, everywhere! They strike quickly, mature quickly, seed quickly and spread quickly. They are a constant and never ending threat to productive farming. And they are more as well...

Weeds are, according to Genesis, a sign of our sinfulness; a reminder, as it were, of what sin produces both within us and within the world. They are a sign of the side of sin which is often confusing because it is not akin to death but to inordinate uncontrolled life! It is life gone haywire; life without boundaries; life with no master. Such life is the cancer of our condition –

life dedicated to nothing but increase and domination and a constant reminder that the opposite of death is not merely life – but life with a specific nature and purpose. **Weeds are a reminder that sometimes life can be as deadly as death.**

Of course the true ecologists amongst will argue, perhaps even convincingly, that the very notion of a weed is a myth, an invention to distinguish between species of plant which although inherently not either good nor evil **are** considered useful by humankind or not. So, they might say, to call a thing a weed is really to make an arbitrary and rather unscientific judgement about a plant. Perhaps in a purely philosophical sense they may be right and to label a plant either good or bad depending on how useful it is to us may well be a little unfair in a strictly moral sense. But whether it is fair or not most of us know what a weed is and we know what weeds cost.

The fact is, weeds are used by the Bible as a primary symbol of what's wrong with us and with the world. They are a picture of our sinful condition and two things, at the very least, strike us when we begin to examine this picture. The first is how **prolific** weeds are. Weed seeds are everywhere and they seem to be able to sprout more readily than most food crops we would want to grow. Clear a piece of land and work it up to a fine tilth and if it rains watch how quickly weed seeds germinate and cover the ground. Hundreds, perhaps evens thousands per square metre germinate and begin to dominate the space created by our working of the ground. Anything sown will have to fight its way through these weeds and, more often than not, if left to themselves, they simply won't make it. The fact is, weeds will take advantage of any opportunity. Give them some free or semi-free space and weeds will sprout. Not even deep ploughing or rotary-hoeing prevents weeds for long.

The same is true for sin. Our lives are the rich soil weeds so love to grow in and given any opportunity they will germinate quickly there. I'm sure this is nothing new for us all and I will come back to this point shortly but for the meantime can we just hold that thought.

The second is how **persistent** weeds are. Chop off the head of a dock and you only invite two heads to replace it. Chop the root in half and the half not removed will continue to grow quite merrily. The same is true of so many weeds. The ubiquitous Californian thistle rises year after year from the same root. Even if it is mown within an inch of the ground. The 'Dunedin Weeds' convolvulus survives for years on minimal growth and it survives in the most inhospitable environments such as underneath hedges and in concrete!! Weeds are persistent – they hang around – the keep growing and they're often deep rooted. The same is true of sin. It goes deep – deeper than we see or know. Much of it can be hidden within the unconscious parts of our mind or the uncharted waters of our spirit. And it persists. We may have to deal with certain sin time and again within our lives. And this is not easy for we who have been Christians for some time for surely by now we should've conquered many of these sinful areas of our lives. Surely by now we will have 'gotten over' these sticky areas; surely by now we will have 'grown up' and 'put behind us' these areas of sinfulness? The picture we have, however, of sin being like weeds indicates something quite the opposite. It indicates that we will always have to be dealing with

some sinful areas of our life. There will always need to be vigilance and there will always need to be a constant weeding of areas of our life.

If this is the case then where does Jesus come into the picture; where does grace fit in and where is all this talk of conquering sin and of dying to sin? What of the victory Christ has won for us? Are we still stuck with having to work our way to salvation?

I'm going to continue this little investigation over the next couple of weeks but let's remind ourselves of a couple of things from the passage from Romans 7 as we finish this week off. The first is simply this... **The normal situation is that we have to deal and keep on dealing with our own sinfulness – our own propensity to do what is wrong.** As long as we are flesh we are corrupted... As long as we share in this life sin has a doorway into our lives. Paul makes this abundantly clear.

¹⁴For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. ¹⁵I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. (Roms 7)

As long as we live; we who represent the soil of this life – weeds will germinate and try to grow within. Any hope of being a weed free medium is forlorn –says Paul. Just as weeds are a fact of cultivation, sin is a fact of life. We are sinners; we are people who must deal with sin, just as a gardener must deal with weeds – **everyday!**

Now if this makes you feel hopeless please don't. This is not an exceptional or unusual situation. Jesus faced the same battles – the same situation. What does the Word say? **⁸Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered;** ' (Hebrews 5) Why should Jesus have to learn obedience? Surely only because disobedience was an option. He was tempted, then, to disobey. And Paul makes it clear elsewhere that temptation is a common human occurrence. **¹³No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.'** (1 Cor 10)

The second thing we should acknowledge from this reading in Romans is that our on-going struggle with sin doesn't mean we're completely without virtue. It doesn't mean we're rotten to the core or that we have no good in us at all and it doesn't mean our salvation is in question. Paul seems completely unfazed by the notion that we have to deal with sin on a daily basis. It gives him no reason to give up or to condemn himself or humanity in general and it is certainly not a deal breaker when it comes to God's love for us. **That we struggle with sin is not a sign of the loss or ineffectiveness of grace, it is, simply, the way things are.**

¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. (Roms 7)

So sin spoils the garden. It introduces weeds which not only make gardening much harder work but which also kill some plants and denude others of their proper vigour. But the garden remains. This is perhaps not well understood within our protestant tradition. The idea that we are sinners seems somehow to be forgotten or dismissed once we've made a commitment to Christ. And if it's not we view with horror the notion that we might be struggling with sin.

This has not been helped by what Calvin and Augustine refer to as the doctrine of total depravity which is **not** the notion that because of sin all humans are totally depraved but is, rather, the idea that people are by nature not inclined or even able to love God wholly with heart, mind, and strength, but rather all are inclined by nature to serve their own will and desires and to reject the rule of God. So, while not all of human nature is depraved, all human nature is totally affected by sin. Now while this may be the case what it has come to mean for countless generations of Christians is not that sin is unlovely but that we who are sinners are unlovely; not that weeds are bad but that the garden is bad.

What we need to understand is that despite the weeds... **God still loves the garden.** Despite our propensity for sin, God loves us **with an undiminished love... but we do have to deal with the weeds.**

This is the point I want to leave with you this morning. You and I are part of race created to care for God's wonderful garden which includes ourselves. We are created to reflect God's love for every aspect of that garden but somehow we've opened the door to weeds. Somehow we've allowed weeds to infect us and the garden we live in. Not all is lost however. The master gardener, Jesus, has made it possible for us to continue working in that garden. At the price of His own life we are once again able to create beauty and to care for the various precious plants in that garden. We may do that by entering His school of gardening which, I should add, includes not only how to care for plants but animals and rivers and mountains and everything else in creation as well. However, a part of this new reality is that we will have to deal with weeds. Weeds in the garden, weeds in your life – weeds in mine. It is not a shameful thing that we have to deal with weeds. We are not different from others because we have weeds in our life.

So what are we like – we who struggle this way? Let me leave you with this illustration...

In the Middle Ages, a famous young painter was hired to create a mural above the high altar of a great church in Paris. The subject was the life of Christ. The artist laboured with persistence for many years, and his mural became known as the marvel of its time. Yet it remained incomplete.

The artist, try as he might, could not complete two of the faces: the Christ Child and Judas Iscariot. Whenever he attempted to fill in these empty spaces, the results were out of harmony with the rest of the work.

The artist was greatly dissatisfied with the situation and could not understand why, despite his talents, he was unable to bring the mural to completion. He prayed for inspiration daily, and not long afterward, while walking on the streets of the city, he happened upon a group of children playing. Among them was a boy who had the face of an angel and who radiated goodness. The artist invited him to sit as a model of the Christ Child. With his parents' permission the child did, and the finished image was considered a masterpiece. Yet the painter could still find no model for the face of Iscariot.

The story of the artist's quandary spread far and wide throughout the country, and many people, considering themselves the possessors of wicked, deformed, or corrupt faces, offered to pose as the betrayer. But to the artist, none of them seemed quite right for the part. He wanted a face so twisted and ruined by its surrender to depravity that all who gazed upon it would see sin incarnate. Years passed, and the artist would often go to the church to pray for inspiration. He longed to complete the mural, yet in his heart he hoped that the face of Judas would forever elude him, that no human soul would ever be so deeply sunk in sin that it would provide the perfect model.

Then one afternoon as he sat in the church, a beggar staggered down the aisle and knelt at the steps of the altar. He reeked and his clothing hung in rags from his haggard figure. He was not an old man, but he was hunched over, as if weighted by an immense burden of dark memories. His face was exactly what the artist had been looking for. He took the broken man home with him, fed him, washed his diseased flesh, clothed him, and spoke to him warmly, as if with a friend. He instructed his children to treat the visitor with the greatest respect. His wife, a kind and devout woman, prepared fine meals for him. But the poor man dwelt in their midst as if he were made of stone. He was completely unable to speak.

He was, however, willing to sit as the artist's model. Weeks went by, and as the work progressed, the beggar would look from time to time at the image of himself materializing on the canvas. A curious grief and horror would fill his eyes. One day, seeing the model's distress, the artist paused in his labour, laying down his brush.

"My friend," he said, "your heart is troubled. What is it?"

The man buried his face in his hands and burst into tears. After a long moment he lifted his eyes to the old painter. "Do you not remember me?" he said, "Years ago I was your model for the Christ Child."

We, likewise, bear the image of God. We are, to our Father in heaven, beauty itself. But our hearts... our hearts hide the image of another for they know how to betray.