

The 16th Sunday of Year A: What ‘God’s Kingdom’ means in practice.
1st Reading: Wisdom 12:13+16-19: God’s authority is used mercifully;
2nd Reading: Romans 8:26-27: The Spirit expresses our prayers to God;
Gospel: Matthew 13:24-43 (long version) Parables of the Kingdom.

This week, as last week, I am dealing mainly with the gospel - a rural parable with a deep spiritual meaning. Like last week, the long version has an allegorical point-by point explanation (where every single detail has a meaning) which was probably added by early Christian preachers. The setting was a time before modern chemicals: a field of wheat gets corrupted by darnel (rye-grass weeds – often called ‘tares’). The question arises: what to do about it?

In the parable, the weeds were sown deliberately by the farmer’s enemy to wreck his harvest, but if the servants pulled the weeds out, they would spoil the wheat also. The only solution was to let wheat and weeds grow together till the harvest-time; then the reapers could get the fully-grown weeds first, and burn them in a bonfire; they could collect the wheat later, and store it in barns.

The explanation (not always read in church) is very precise: the farmer = Jesus; the field = the world; the wheat = good people; the darnel/weeds = bad people; the enemy = the devil; the harvest = the end of the world; the reapers = the angels; the fire = hell; the barn = heaven. It all sounds clear and simple.

Clear? yes; but simple? no. The situation behind the parable is anything but. Religious people down the centuries have often had to face a crisis in faith, when confronted with the idea that an all-powerful and all-loving God allows evil, (both in physical suffering and in cruel or nasty people), to co-exist with – and hurt - good people in the same world. Unless a Christian’s faith is really deep, it can easily be knocked off-course (or even destroyed altogether) when he/she is confronted by evil. This could be watching loved ones die; losing jobs in these financially hard times; seeing the effect of corrupt governments in third-world areas we’re trying to help; violence in our communities; etc...the list is endless. Most people question their faith when confronted by crises like this; I think this is natural and can actually be healthy. (This is like the “Doubting Thomas” issue after Easter.) Yes, I admit that there are some who lose their faith easily, at the first hurdle, if that faith is shallow, but there are also many who lose it only after much suffering and anxious heart-searching. I sympathise with them.

When we are faced with evil in our midst, how do we react? If it is moral evil (cruel and wicked people) – which is what the parable seems to be about –

the natural reaction is to “weed it out”, as the servants wanted to do in the parable. The farmer’s reaction is actually quite subtle – the process of getting rid of the weeds would also harm the wheat. In our society, where people can use or misuse their free will, if we try to eliminate bad behaviour completely, we would end up with a police state where good people’s lives would also be harmed. In the parable, the “bad stuff” – the weeds or darnel – was put there by the farmer’s enemy. In reality, we know now that the bad behaviour of most people has a whole raft of causes – some people are just nasty from being small; others become nasty through their upbringing or peer-group. The more I read on the nature-versus-nurture argument, the more confused I become! I suppose the truth is somewhere in the middle. As the parable suggests, the ultimate answer will come when we reach the next world!

I think this is where prayer comes into it. The more puzzled we are, the more we need the Holy Spirit’s help. In the 2nd reading, St Paul writes: *“When we cannot choose words to pray properly, the Spirit expresses our plea in way that could never be put into words, and God...knows everything in our hearts.”* I find this helpful when thinking about the problem of evil. Ultimately, it is a mystery, and one that even Jesus, as God’s Son, had to suffer. There is no simple, logical explanation. Sometimes, all we can do is “offer it up”, in union with Jesus’ own sufferings. To accept this in prayer, we need the silent help of the Holy Spirit – that is what St Paul was getting at. Doing this requires both humility and courage – things which I find difficult to practise at times!

In the case of physical evil, human life progresses when we work together to confront problems, making the world healthier and fairer. I do not think we should expect “miracles” to solve the problems for us. In the case of moral evil (bad people), yes, we do need protection, with good policing and penal systems in society. But at the end of the day, we all have differing amounts of free will, and how we use it is a measure of our maturity and generosity. Good behaviour is one of the ways we worship God, and bad behaviour is when we reject him. One last point: few people are either 100% good or 100% bad. Most of us are somewhere in the middle, with the result that on the same day, we can do some good things and some bad ones. Yes, the parable of the wheat & the weeds has a clear-cut style, but we all know that real life is much more messy than that. *Fr Jim Dunne.*