

16th Sunday of Ordinary Time (A)

The parable of the weeds and wheat we just heard in the gospel reading (short form) is about the kingdom of heaven, sometimes also called the kingdom of God or the reign of God. Jesus inaugurated the kingdom with his miracles revealing that the kingdom is a place free from suffering and death. While the kingdom has already begun here on earth it will not be fully established until Jesus returns at the end of time. How have you experienced the kingdom in your life?

Jesus lived in a rural area as we do and so understood the problem that weeds pose for farmers. While farmers today use various types of chemicals to deal with weeds the owner of the field decided to allow both weeds and wheat to grow together and wait until harvest time to separate them. He took a risk here since the weeds may eventually choke the wheat and he would be left with no harvest at all. Notice, he didn't blame the presence of weeds on his servants who prepared the land and sowed the seed but rather he laid the blame on an enemy. The parable focuses more on what to do next rather than on explaining how it happened.

The weeds and wheat in the parable both represent something. The weeds represent evil people while the wheat represents good people. The Christians to whom Matthew is writing his gospel see themselves as the wheat. The weeds they might understand in a variety of ways. Perhaps they represent the Gentiles, that is, unbelievers whose very presence threatened their faith? Perhaps they represent fellow Jews who persecute them for following Jesus and not Moses? The question is what to do with these evil people? The parable seems to suggest forbearance on the part of the good people, that is, initially they should do nothing to exclude the evil people in their midst.

This also seems to be the position of the early church in dealing with Christians who renounced the faith in face of persecution and who then wanted to return to the church when the persecution ended. Bishops like Augustine and Callistus argued that these sinners should be reinstated in the church and not cut off from it.

What about us? Don't we consider ourselves to be good and decent people? If so, how then do we deal with the presence of sinners, that is, evil people among us? We may not say it bluntly, but there may be in our hearts the belief that there is no room among us for murderers, or sexual offenders, or public officials who have violated the trust of society. Do we believe that the kingdom of God is only for the righteous?

The parable of the weeds and wheat reveals that God has a different point of view. God knows that if sinners are expelled now some of us who are basically good might be cast out with them. There will be a time for separation and judgment, but the time is not now. God and not us will do the separating and judging. This means that we will have to live with the sinner and, even more challengingly, show them the same kind of concern and love we show others. The presence of sinners does not necessarily erode the quality of the kingdom. Instead, it provides us an opportunity for us to be generous and forgiving. Are we prepared for such an opportunity?