

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 23 July 2023 + Mt 13:24-43

Like last Sunday, we are presented today with another series of parables from St. Matthew's Gospel. But before we look at the parables, I'd like to back up a moment and consider what a parable is, and why Jesus taught so often using parables.

So first, our word 'parable' comes from a Hebrew word meaning a 'cryptic statement meant to stimulate thought.' They come in many forms: allegory, proverb, riddle, and so on. So the next question is, why did Jesus like to use parables for His teachings? In our Gospel last Sunday, Jesus seemed to almost infer that He taught in parables to intentionally confuse His listeners, which doesn't seem very helpful. But a closer look at the text reveals that He wasn't hiding His teachings from them as much as their closed hearts rendered *themselves* incapable of understanding.

Another reason why Jesus taught in parables was because in a society where many people would not have been educated, they were easy to understand, *if* one had an open heart. Many of the parables, such as last week and today's, used concepts from agriculture—the main form of livelihood for much of Jesus' original audience. And even more, I imagine that people back then loved a good story as much as we do today (even if ours today are usually told on screen). To use a popular term, Jesus was 'meeting people where they were at.'

One more preliminary note. In many of the parables (like today's), Jesus' intention was to explain to the people what the "Kingdom of heaven" was like. So we should ask here what exactly Jesus meant by the 'Kingdom of heaven'? Because for Jesus, the 'kingdom of heaven' is not just where we all hope to go when we die. Rather, the Kingdom has 3 dimensions. First and foremost, the Kingdom of heaven is that "place", so to speak, where God reigns. And the place where God reigns in His fullness is above all in the person of Jesus Christ. So when Jesus talks about the Kingdom, He is telling people about who He Himself is.

Next, it follows that the Kingdom of heaven is present in any human heart where Jesus reigns as King and Lord. And because none of us can live or follow Christ in isolation, the Kingdom of heaven is also all of us, as one Body: the Church. And we know the Church Herself also has three aspects: the Church militant here on earth, the Church suffering in purgatory, and the Church triumphant in heaven, where the fullness of God dwells.

So now with that foundation, we are ready to look at our Gospel parables themselves. The first parable is sometimes called the 'weeds or 'tares' and the wheat'. It is possible that the 'weeds' spoken of here is 'darnel,' a weed that looks very much like wheat as it is growing, and whose roots would have intertwined with the wheat roots. Yet darnel flour is poisonous, which is why Roman Law even made it a crime to sabotage crops by planting darnel in the wheat. So having darnel in the wheat might go unnoticed during the growing season, but at harvest, it could be disastrous.

All of this helps to explain the interpretation Jesus gives of the parable to the disciples. Again, I don't need to repeat that. So maybe an application. In our day today, those of us who sincerely want to be the 'good seed of the children of the kingdom' can easily grow discouraged and even angry at the apparent lack of divine accountability for evildoers. We might think of pro-choice politicians (especially those who claim to be Catholic), or people who start wars, abuse the vulnerable, force harmful anti-Christian agendas on us, etc. Why doesn't God do something?

Well, while it is right to 'hunger and thirst for righteous', we have to be careful here for at least two reasons. First, the Lord doesn't want to condemn sinners; rather He seeks their conversion. That's why He ate with sinners; to call them to repentance. So His apparent 'delay' in justice allows them time to hopefully convert. And 2nd, the stark reality is that, if we are honest, sometimes we can be more like weeds than wheat. And if we desire the Lord's mercy, we have to be willing to extend that same mercy. That's not to say that a day of reckoning will never come. There will be a judgment at the end of time. Until then, we are called to be wheat, to sow good seed, and leave the harvest to God.

Next, the parable of the mustard seed. Seeds are fascinating when you think about it. One little seed, no bigger than a ladybug, contains the potential for a whole plant, a whole tree. But it takes time, water, sunlight, nutrients to grow. And most of the time nature is so gradual we don't notice growth. So it is with the Kingdom. I recently got a kind letter from a seminarian, where he recalled that something I said 5 years ago was meaningful for him. Many times I wondered what good I was doing when I was assigned to the seminary. I'm sure something like this has happened to all of us. We are humbled that God has used us in some small way, and we wonder, why did I doubt, 'o ye of little faith'? Christ seemed like a failure on the Cross. But look at its fruit! The Kingdom still grows, even though we don't always see it.

Finally, the parable of the leaven. All of us are called to be like leaven—at work, at family gatherings, at school, anywhere really, where the Kingdom has not yet fully come. We might think, 'what can one person alone possibly do?' The story of St. Peter Chanel comes to mind here. St. Peter Chanel was a Marist priest who traveled from his native France to the Island of Futuna in the South Pacific in 1837. Upon arrival, he struggled with the local language, and found little response to his preaching of the Gospel. The tribal King soon grew jealous of his presence, and had Peter clubbed to death. Within 2 years *after* his martyrdom, the whole island left their idol worship and embraced Catholicism. It remains 99% Catholic to this day. A little yeast leavened the whole batch of dough.

So now the last piece of the parable puzzle is this: parables are not just nice stories. They are meant to lead each of us, in our own lives, into the mystery of the life of Christ. So we pray for the grace today to recognize the Kingdom in the person of Christ, have open hearts to seek first and to embrace the Kingdom as it comes to us in our hearts, and in His Church.