

Sixteenth Sunday of the Year

How did you pass the time during lockdown? I understand that for many people lockdown was a chance to get the garden in order and for others a chance to spend some extra time in the kitchen developing their culinary skills.

Last week I spoke a little bit about parables in general. Jesus didn't invent the idea of a parable. However the parables that Jesus told were original to him and are an essential part of his ministry and mission. In the Gospel according to Matthew a number of them are grouped together into a 'parable discourse' the third of five such discourses that shape the structure of this particular gospel. Although very much rooted in the day to day experiences of his own time and place most of the parables do travel well, and if you have spent time recently weeding or baking bread you will recognise your own experiences in the parables we have heard today (Matthew 13:24-43) and are invited to reflect on what those experiences can teach us about 'the kingdom of heaven'.

Turning specifically to the parable of the wheat and the darnel. I have had plenty of opportunity to reflect on this parable over the recent weeks. As some of you will know, the gentleman who used to look after my garden died earlier this year just before the start of the lockdown. I have been fortunate to have some help in getting the garden under control and planting some new plants but the weeds keep coming and even after weeding they keep coming back. When it all seems too much I can console myself that I am following the teaching of Our Lord in 'letting it all grow' rather than destroying plants by mistake but I suspect I am not doing justice either to the parable or to the hard work of those who got the garden under control during the spring.

What is the message of this parable? It is obviously a warning against making rash judgements about others but rather leaving such matters in the hands of God. It is also a warning against making rash decisions about ourselves but learning to live with certain things again trusting that God in his own time will make things right. In our lives there will hopefully be many things that we can recognise as being 'wheat' that is our good response to the Son of Man. There may also be things that we recognise as 'darnel' things that do not belong to the kingdom of heaven. However as the parable teaches us weeding out the darnel is not a 'do it yourself' task, rather it is a task that belongs to God.

Therefore the first stage of any such 'weeding' must be prayer. If we don't know how to pray then in the Second Reading (Romans 8:26-27) St Paul reminds us that 'the Spirit comes to help us in our weakness'. So we ask the Holy Spirit to guide and direct us and to show us what is the 'wheat' in our lives that we need to be thankful for and cultivate with great care and what is the 'darnel' which we need to be aware of and ask God to help us keep under control until it can be safely weeded out.

Although our gardens and fields are different to the ones found in the Holy Land nevertheless they can still remind us of some important spiritual truths. Sitting in the garden enjoying a refreshing drink can remind us of the original harmony between God and humanity in the garden of Eden (Genesis 2:8-25). However working hard and wiping the sweat of our face to remove brambles and thistles can remind us of the reality of the fall

and our need of redemption (Genesis 3:18-19). It was in a garden that Jesus prayed in anguish and his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood (Luke 22:44), but it was in a garden also that he was buried (John 19:41) and from which he rose from the dead.

Even though the summer holidays are about to begin, I suspect many of us will not be going too far away and will perhaps spend a bit more time in our gardens watching the seeds that we have sown in the spring flower and come to harvest. I hope there won't be too many weeds! But above all I hope that we take the opportunity to reflect on the mysteries of the 'kingdom of heaven' which continue to unfold before our eyes if we are willing to see them.