

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 23rd July 2023

The parables that Jesus tells always have a purpose and a message. Although they were originally told in a particular context and a particular time and place, they still speak to us today, because they tell us something about what it means to be human: they speak to every time, and every place, including our own. So, when we hear any of the Lord's parables, the question to ask ourselves is, what does this word from the tradition say to us today? What difference does it make to me as I start the new week on Monday morning.

Today's parable is about judgement, and patience. The world is a messy place. Even the best of us is a jumble of the good and the bad, of virtue and vice, of considered and sacrificial generosity as well as thoughtless and casual unkindness or bad-temper. And even the best of groups of people is a mixture too, the fruitful life-giving wheat and the sterile useless weeds all mixed in together – goodness me, we only need to look at the Church, and its recent history in particular, to see that. The servants are keen to get into the field and start sorting: they want to make a start on judging the good from the bad right now. And in a sense this seems wise – get rid of the weeds and you will stop them choking the wheat, and the field will be more fruitful. But it also comes at a cost. There will be some 'collateral damage' – some of the wheat will, inevitably, be lost with the weeds.

This is a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven, and so it starts with the question, 'what would the world look like if everyone acknowledged God as Lord, if everyone made him the guiding principle of all their decisions and actions?' So, putting those two things together, we get a story about patience and judgement in a world where God is the guiding principle. And we discover that God is patient in judging. As the Book of Wisdom reminds us, patience, mildness and kindness are the marks of the wise judge: strength is not shown in harshness, but in kindness. This is not a concept of strength that people find comes naturally to them, but the Book of Wisdom is adamant: the judge who is strong and confident in his power and his judgements shows that strength through mildness – he has, after all, nothing to prove. It is only the insecure who have to bolster their position with shows of force. Humility is a much more appealing characteristic in a leader than pride.

And so the farmer holds back the servants in their enthusiasm and stays their hand. Wait a little longer. Some of those weeds might turn out to be wheat after all, give them a chance. We can be so quick to judge. It is a human failing, but it is a particular failing of our present day. It is so easy to destroy a person's reputation, to jump to conclusions about them, to believe every accusation and insinuation. There are ways and means for the people who need to do so to make reasonable judgements about what people have said and done, and to apply what sanctions are proper. But that requires a little patience, and that is in short supply. So news organisations and private individuals can be quick to jump onto the bandwagon, anxious not to be left behind or outdone in their outrage: the moment someone appears to have feet of clay, it seems a terrifying compulsion to annihilate them takes over.

This is not the way of the Kingdom, and if we ask ourselves what difference this parable makes to my Monday morning, part of the answer is that it makes us pause before joining in a feeding frenzy of accusation and outrage. True judgement is patient and kindly – firm, yes, and quick to act to protect the weak, but slow to make presumptions, slow to act without hearing both sides, unwilling to join the crowd just for the sake of being part of the crowd. Next time you see the media destroying someone’s reputation, seeming to take a perverse pleasure in bringing them low, think of the weeds and the wheat and the patience of God. The world was, is, and always will be comprised of a great mix of the good and the bad and those in the middle, and those who move between the three. We should not be surprised if people are found to be imperfect (a little reflection on our own lives should show us how unsurprising it is) and perhaps we should also not be surprised if those given great power and influence sometimes find it very hard to control the urge to misuse them. Of course we can be critical of people’s proven failings, and can want the guilty to be punished, but never let us forget that God is slow to judge and always patient and kind.

Thinking of Monday morning once again, this parable also makes us thankful that God is patient in judging us. As this Monday morning dawns, have I progressed in holiness, have I become more truly human than I was a week ago? Perhaps I have – but if not, then don’t let’s despair, fortunately God is slow to judge and in his patience he gives us time to show what we are made of – fruitful wheat or sterile weeds. But don’t let’s test his patience too long; none of us knows when harvest day will come, and if we are looking for the best time to show ourselves to be fruitful wheat, the best time is always now.