

Homily for July 21, 2002  
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A

By Father Charles Bowes

Wisdom 12:13, 16-18  
Romans 8:26-27  
Matthew 13:24-43

## *In spite of our troubled selves and our troubled world, the Kingdom of God will continue to grow.*

Some scary stuff in our gospel, Matthew 13: “They will throw (those evil doers) into the fiery furnace where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. And the righteous will shine like the sun...” Sounds like a whole lot of smiting going on – smite those evildoers and reward the just.

Actually, the major theme of the earliest form of these parables is the patience of God, not the wrath of God. And the original parable is much milder than all this smiting. It is the late community of believers who added the vivid images of the fiery furnace and the avenging angels – after all, that early Church community was being persecuted by fellow Jews and the Roman authorities, so naturally they wanted to make sure those folks got their “come-uppance.”

It’s good to consider that good and evil not only coexist in our world like weeds and wheat growing together, but that evil coexists *in us*. And instead of proceeding from this gospel to divide up the world into the good guys and the bad guys, we might well consider that at the end of the world, or at least at such time as God remakes us, we will, if we give God any opening at all, be purified by his astonishing and

gracious love. Yes, God is just. But both Muslims and Hebrews, those other “religions of the Book,” argue in many ways and in charming stories that God’s mercy is always greater than God’s justice. Are Christians to believe less?

At times, the sacred scriptures are urgent about the kingdom: “The reign of God is at hand!” But the parables this Sunday stress God’s patience in bringing about the kingdom of heaven, the promised new world. God can wait out the maturation of the harvest. Then it will be clear who is wheat and who is weed – what dimensions of us are weed and wheat. In this, God keeps faith with what God has made, knowing of what we are made: malleable stuff, changeable stuff, perfectible stuff. Growth and change are always possible as Cardinal John Henry Newmann wrote: “To live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often.”

In each of us, the mixture of wheat and weed is a given. So in the second letter of Saint Peter we read, “The Lord does not delay in keeping the promise – though some think it delay. Rather God shows you generous patience since God wants none to perish, but all to come to repentance.” And how appropriate that this letter is assumed to be one of the earliest examples of a post-baptismal sermon.

Wheat and weeds, it is all with us right now, and it is all material for the kingdom. We are good at affirming the resurrection in the sense of the human person. But our reading from Romans chapter 8 unfolds for us a cosmic groaning and yearning for resurrection. "The Spirit himself intercedes with inexpressible groanings." This part we too often miss. All creation is longing and groaning, eagerly awaiting the revelation of the children of God. Why? Because the world is going with us and in a way not unlike whatever it means to say we will live in eternity in our resurrected bodies. So, too, the world as we know it is passing away. That is, the world is being transformed in all of its physical reality into the new world God intended it to be from all time. A question I find helpful to pray out of is, "Lord, how did you come to know God's patience with the world in the face of the impatience of the human spirit?"

There's a story told about an aged man who Abraham hospitably invited to his tent, but who refused to join him in prayer to the one spiritual God. Learning that he was a fire worshipper, Abraham drove him from his door. That night, God appeared to Abraham in a vision and said, "I have bourn with that ignorant one for seventy years; could you not have had patiently suffered him one night?"

And an even shorter version of much the same admonition to patience is given by the writer Evelyn Underhill, who wrote, "A lot of the road to heaven has to be taken at thirty miles an hour."

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