

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

I have a healthy crop of carrots growing in a raised garden bed at home. I inspect them regularly to see if there are any weeds growing among them. Whatever weeds I find I pull out. And while I pull out the weeds, I pull out some of the carrots as well, making room for the others to grow.

The workers that we meet in today's gospel are moved to pull out the weeds that they see growing amongst the wheat that had been planted. The parable talks about darnel, a plant that I once saw in the Toronto Botanical Gardens. We are told that it is a nasty weed that looks very much like wheat when it is young, but then as it grows it so wraps itself around another plant that it is impossible to pull up without pulling up the other plant with it.

The farmer in the parable must have known that and so advises that it must be left alone until harvest time. Like the other parables that Jesus told, we need to ask, "What could this be saying to us?" We know that we live in a world where goodness does not have its own way. God's kingdom is not established without the opposition that comes from evil. We are aware of that in our own hearts. We know that we struggle to make room for God's love, to let God's love grow in us as it competes against our own selfishness and all the different attractions that pull

us away from what is good. But if we tried to pull out of our hearts everything that was misguided or selfish, angry or immature, what would we be left with? What we want for ourselves can point the way to what others need. What makes us angry can often move us to change what is unjust. Our immaturity can open us up to the wisdom of others. In our misguidedness we can stumble upon the truth that we need.

Our society often wants to solve the problem of evil in our world in the same way as we are trying to solve the Covid19 pandemic. We try to isolate anyone who does things wrong from the rest of society as if they were diseased. This is often not a solution at all. It is much easier to pull out the weeds than it is to try to address the root of the injustice that has been committed.

We are not called to pull out the weeds in our world or in our community. We often think that we would be much better without them. But today's gospel urges us to have the patience to live with them. We would love to live in a perfect world where nobody does us any harm. We would love to live in a world where we do not have to suffer the mistakes that others make. But we know that we ourselves are not perfect. We know that we make many mistakes. It is a great grace to be able to live in our imperfect world while doing all that we can to live as best we know how.

The farmer in our parable today can be an image of the God who gives us every opportunity to change and seek forgiveness. It often takes us a long time to recognise our sinfulness. We can get so used to acting in a particular way that we only recognise that it is wrong or selfish when we look at what we are doing through the eyes of someone else. We can be grateful that we are not pulled out as young weeds but have time to grow mature enough to recognise that we are weeds and not wheat.

The God of forgiveness is described rather beautifully in today's first reading, from the Book of Wisdom. "Your justice has its source in strength, your sovereignty over all makes you lenient to all...disposing of such strength you are mild in judgement, you govern us with great lenience." The Wisdom writer goes on to say that we need to learn from God and act towards one another with the same kind of lenience and forgiveness.

The other parables that Jesus uses today about how the tiny mustard seed grows into a tree and the little bit of yeast leavens the whole loaf of bread are meant to give us hope. We can often be overcome by our weaknesses. We can think of ourselves as being too small and too sinful to make a difference to our world. But it is God's Spirit in us that makes us grow. It is God's Spirit in us that moves us to do what we might think is beyond us.

St. Paul has something to say about that too. He says that the Spirit comes to help us in our weakness. He uses the example of prayer. Often, we don't know how to pray. But once we begin to pray God's Spirit takes over and carries us and gives us the words we need to express something that is bigger than us. Our prayers can be very self-centred at times. But God's Spirit expands our minds and our hearts and allows us to catch something of what God wants not just for us but for all people.

And it is with the help of that Spirit that we can look again at our gospel and to see that it is the work of the Lord of the harvest to sort out the weeds from the wheat. Our job is to be good wheat and to grow to maturity and produce the crop that God's spirit within us can produce. In the parable the wheat survives. It is the dandelion that is gathered up into bundles and burnt in the fire. As sons and daughters of a gracious and forgiving God so will we survive.