

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – July 23, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 8:30 & 11:00am Sunday Masses – 800 words

Our Lord illustrates his kingdom for us this Sunday through yet another parable – speaking about the wheat and the weeds. The word that is translated as “weeds” in our current lectionary actually refers to a very specific type of weed known as “darnel”. Darnel looks just like wheat and thrives in the midst of wheat. It is only when it becomes ripe that it can be told apart. Darnel is also toxic and harmful if consumed. A farmer therefore had to be patient, wait for the crop to ripen, and only then be able to separate what was good from what was bad. And the best way to ensure that the darnel was destroyed and could not do further damage was to burn it.

There are many ways that this parable can be applied – from focusing on the coexistence of bad and good people in the world, to the coexistence of good and evil in our souls. However, there is another detail present in today’s gospel that can easily be missed, but is extremely important. It has to do with how the weeds got mixed into the crop to begin with. The Lord narrates it thus: “While everyone was asleep [the] enemy came and sowed weeds all through the wheat.” While everyone was asleep. Are we awake? This is the question that I would encourage us to consider this week.

The enemy who sows the weed is the devil. The devil, scripture tells us, has power in this world and over this world. Many today, however, think that the devil doesn’t exist, that he is a pious construct invented by simple people. Such individuals have taken the bait: the devil wants us to think he doesn’t exist! They are therefore truly asleep, and in ignoring the devil’s existence, basically give him free reign to do his work. But then there are those who do believe rightly, yet are still asleep also. I would presume that that is the greater risk for us here. And this is what we must consider.

How is it, then, that we, even though we believe rightly, yet can be asleep, such that the enemy can sow bad seed in our souls or in our midst? It all really comes down to our level of worldliness and whether we are actively striving to overcome it. Many well-meaning Catholics today go with the flow, watching, for example, all the latest shows in a sort of unreflective way. As you might guess, on the rare occasions that I watch television, I generally watch the food channel. And even there I am astonished at how worldly values – values that go against what we Catholics believe – are brought in to the various narratives, often in subtle ways. But then I hear people comparing notes on the current series that they keep up with – and I later learn that these series regularly portray sex, nudity, or heavy violence. Such people are asleep, and the enemy is certainly sowing toxic weeds in their souls!

The matter of television shows is a rather easy example, but there are many other areas where we might simply be going with the flow, not questioning what others do and joining in it ourselves, or otherwise being negligent – unreflective – and giving the enemy an “in”. Our Catholic faith has always been and always will be counter-cultural: living it out usually involves swimming against the stream. Taking up our crosses and following after Christ requires a deliberate choice, a choice which we express each year when we renew our baptismal vows at Easter: “Do you renounce Satan? – I do. And all his works? – I do. And all his empty show? – I do.” But once a year, at Easter, is really not enough: we should recall these vows daily, and daily seek to live them out. As St. Peter says in his first letter, “Be sober and alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.”¹ The enemy never sleeps; woe to us, if we do.

¹ 1 Peter 5:8

Christ invites us this week, then, to examine our vigilance and ask if there are not some areas where we are asleep and effectively allowing the enemy to sow his bad seed – if there are not some areas where we easily give in to a spirit of worldliness instead of courageously going against the flow. And we need not wait for those weeds to ripen in us; no, once we have identified them, the Lord will gladly remove them for us, particularly through the sacrament of confession. He is patient with us precisely to give us time to repent, for he does not wish to cast us into the fire! Are we awake? Lord, please awaken us, and in your mercy, save us from the weeds!