

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – July 19, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 7:15 & 11am Sunday Masses – 750 words

The weed that the gospel says grows up among the wheat is called “darnel” in English, and it is hard to tell it apart from wheat; the two plants cannot easily be separated. Only when they reach their more mature stage, when the ear forms and ripens, is it clearer which is which. Thus the Lord tells us that the two are not separated until the end – until harvest time – with the weeds being bundled and burned, while the wheat is gathered into his barn.

It is obvious that this parable has a direct application to our human condition. Good and evil co-exist in our world, and often one masquerades as the other. Sometimes the evil remains hidden but only appears at a later stage; but often the good remains hidden as well. In any event, a pitfall we must avoid as we consider this parable is that of excluding ourselves from it. Yes, we must face the question: Am I with the wheat – or am I one of the weeds?

And what emerges from humbly considering this question before God is the fact that we – every one of us – have been both. And this is, in fact, where the analogy fails. For a plant cannot become another type of plant. It may look the same as another, but if it is fundamentally different, that difference is discoverable on some level. Whereas we are always the same persons, but sometimes we are the friends of God and sometimes we are not.

You see, inherent in this parable is the concept of mercy. We are all growing up together in God’s garden; in the end it shall emerge who was truly among the good and who among the bad. Until then, there is God’s mercy – which is capable of transforming us. No farmer can make one plant become another. But God can always change us from bad to good. We have indeed been among the weeds – but may the Lord save us from ripening in that state.

Yes, our struggle with good and evil includes confronting the fact that others make bad choices or act with bad intentions. They disappoint us and they fail others; and if they are culpable for their choices, they offend our good God. But he is merciful. He can change them, also. Let us never consider anyone “beyond remedy”. We have to be reminded of this constantly – especially in times like ours, when evil so often seems to rule the day.

In this regard, I always think of our patron, St. Paul. He was in hot pursuit of Christians, totally convinced of his righteousness, thinking he was serving God by persecuting the Church. But God knocked him off his horse. Saul’s conversion was the Lord’s initiative, very much in spite of Saul. But God can do the same for anyone. Our part is to pray for that outcome. And to be patient while we must otherwise co-exist, wheat and weeds, until the Lord decrees the harvest.

Thus the first reading spoke of God’s mercy in terms of his almighty power. If he were not almighty, he would be constrained only to carry out swift justice. But because his power is so great, he can restrain the hand of his justice in view of our eventual repentance. We have all benefitted from his mercy – and we will surely have to plead for it many times before the harvest arrives. We should plead not only for ourselves, but for all sinners everywhere.

The Church, in her wisdom, used to pray for this very thing after every Low Mass. There were invocations to St. Michael and Our Lady, and a plea to the Sacred Heart for mercy. But there was also a prayer for the conversion of all. Sometimes it is difficult to pray for that intention and really mean it. But we should at least try – and the “Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness”, as the second reading said. So I conclude with that prayer:

O God, our refuge and our strength, look down with mercy upon the people who cry to thee; and by the intercession of the glorious and immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of God, of Saint Joseph her spouse, of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and of all the saints, in thy mercy and goodness hear our prayers for the conversion of sinners, and for the liberty and exaltation of our Holy Mother, the Church. Through the same Christ, our Lord. Amen.