

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time - A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Wisdom 12:13, 16-19

The Book of Wisdom, also called the Wisdom of Solomon, is believed to have been written in the first century before Christ by a Greek-speaking Jew of Alexandria in Egypt. The Egyptian rulers from Ptolemy VIII (116 B.C.) to Cleopatra (30 B.C.) were not well-disposed toward their Jewish subjects. The Jewish religion was despised by the powerful, the wealthy, and the learned. The faith of the Jews was in constant danger of corruption from idolatry and false philosophy. To strengthen the faith of his co-religionists, to console them in their afflictions, to raise their hearts above the sordidness and immorality by which they were surrounded – this was the main purpose of the writer of the Book of Wisdom. But he also had another purpose in view. Many Jews, anxious to gain the good will of the Egyptians, had faltered in their allegiance to Yahweh and gone over to the camp of the enemy. To these unfortunates the sacred writer addresses himself time and again, warning them of the impending judgment of God and conjuring them to return to the path of true Wisdom which alone leads to perfect happiness.

The Book of Wisdom was not written merely for the Jews sojourning in Egypt, but for all men of all times. Every Jew who read it must have been filled with the joyous conviction that God would never forsake His people, and that Israel's religious ideals were bound to gain the final victory over the pagan world. The Christian finds in it the highest religious and moral lessons – lessons which are of paramount importance today, just as they were over two thousand years ago. The frivolity of the ungodly, the trials and consolations of the pious, the utter discomfiture of the wicked and the serene confidence of the just in the day of judgement, the glorious origin and the supreme excellence of Wisdom, the humble dependence on God of the true seeker after Wisdom – all this is described with a warmth and vividness that cannot but move the heart to its depths and attract it irresistibly to the love and service of God.

In our first reading today the sacred author speaks of God's merciful discipline of sinners.

¹³ There is no god besides you who have the care of all, that you need show you have not unjustly condemned. ¹⁶ For your might is the source of justice; your mastery over all things makes you lenient to all.

In Wisdom 2:11 the wicked say that their might is the norm of justice. Unlike the wicked, whose weakness and insecurity prompt them to use unjustly what strength they have, God, being all-powerful and unchallenged, experiences no disturbed moral equilibrium and is therefore just and even merciful.

¹⁷ For you show your might when the perfection of your power is disbelieved;

Pharaoh comes to mind, but it could be true of anyone.

and in those who know you, you rebuke temerity.

Temerity is foolish disregard of danger.

¹⁸ But though you are master of might, you judge with clemency, and with much lenience you govern us; for power, whenever you will, attends you.

God's power is His might as well as His ability to control it.

¹⁹ And you taught your people, by these deeds, that those who are just must be kind; and you gave your sons good ground for hope that you would permit repentance for their sins.

2nd Reading - Romans 8:26-27

Today we continue with Saint Paul's description of the future glory that awaits those who live the Christian life empowered by the Spirit.

²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings.

Human aspirations risk being inefficacious because of the natural weakness of the flesh, but the Spirit adds its intercession, transcending such weakness. The result is that the Christian utters what would otherwise be impossible; to pray "Abba, Father." The Spirit must assist the Christian and the Christian who prays it is aware of the manifestation of the Spirit within them.

"It is not possible, says Paul, for us human beings to have a precise knowledge of everything. So we ought to yield to the Creator of our nature and with joy and great relish accept those things which He has decided on and have an eye not to the appearance of events but to the decisions of the Lord. After all, He knows better than we do what is for our benefit, and He also knows what steps must be taken for our salvation." [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 388), *Homilies on Genesis, Second Series* 30,16]

²⁷ And the one who searches hearts

This is an Old Testament phrase for God (1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Kings 8:39; Psalm 7:11; 17:3; 139:1). Only God Himself understands the language and mind of the Spirit and He recognizes such Spirit assisted prayer.

knows what is the intention of the Spirit, because it intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will.

It was part of His plan of salvation that the Spirit should play such a dynamic role in the aspirations and prayers of Christians.

“It is clear that the prayer of every spirit is known to God, from whom nothing is secret or hidden (see Job 37:16; Acts 15:18; 1 John 3:20) How much more then should [the Father] know what the Holy Spirit, who is the same essence as Himself, is saying?” [The Ambrosiaster (ca. A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles*]

Gospel - Matthew 13:24-43

Our reading today takes over from where last week's reading ended. Recall that Jesus had just begun teaching in parables and that last week we heard the Parable of the Sower. Today we hear the Parables of the Weeds Among the Wheat, the Mustard Seed, and the Leaven.

²⁴ He [Jesus] proposed another parable to them. "The kingdom of heaven may be likened to a man who sowed good seed in his field.

The man who sowed turns out to be a landowner with slaves (verse 27). The slaves are scandalized because there are weeds.

²⁵ While everyone was asleep his enemy came and sowed weeds all through the wheat, and then went off. ²⁶ When the crop grew and bore fruit, the weeds appeared as well.

The weed is commonly recognized as dandelion, a weed that has resemblance to wheat.

²⁷ The slaves of the householder came to him and said, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where have the weeds come from?' ²⁸ He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' His slaves said to him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' ²⁹ He replied, 'No, if you pull up the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let them grow together until harvest;

This is the crucial part of the answer. It advocates patience and tolerance until the final sorting.

then at harvest time I will say to the harvesters, "First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles for burning; but gather the wheat into my barn.""

God's earthly kingdom has both good and bad; the sorting will come at the end.

³¹ He proposed another parable to them. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a person took and sowed in a field. ³² It is the smallest of all the seeds, yet when full-grown

it is the largest of plants.

The mustard seed is not the smallest of all seeds, nor does it become the largest of plants. When full grown, it becomes a shrub some ten to twelve feet in height. The point of this parable is the contrast in sizes: The kingdom which starts from near invisibility will shift quickly to its full grandeur with its universal, all embracing hospitality.

It becomes a large bush, and the 'birds of the sky come and dwell in its branches.'"

This is possibly an allusion to Daniel 4:20-21.

³³ He spoke to them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leavened."

A small amount of yeast causes the much larger loaf to rise. Likewise, there is a surprising effect that a small movement can have on all society. God's plan works almost invisibly to bring about its purposes. Yeast (leaven) in the Jewish tradition often had a symbolic meaning of evil. Here, Jesus uses it as a symbol of the power of God. It is possible to see God present and active in everything if we just look at them in wonder.

³⁴ All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables. He spoke to them only in parables, ³⁵ to fulfill what had been said through the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables, I will announce what has lain hidden from the foundation (of the world)."

The source of this quotation is Psalm 78:2. The text has been freely adapted to fit the revelation of Jesus. David is called a prophet in Acts 2:30.

³⁶ Then, dismissing the crowds, he went into the house. His disciples approached him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field." ³⁷ He said in reply, "He who sows good seed is the Son of Man, ³⁸ the field is the world,

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the good seed the children of the kingdom. The weeds are the children of the evil one,

The evil one here is a person who is identified as the devil in the next verse.

³⁹ and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as weeds are collected and burned (up) with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all who cause others to sin and all evildoers. ⁴² They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears ought to hear."

The Church is not entirely a community of the elect; it has unfaithful members as well. God will tolerate such members in the Church just as He tolerates them in the world at large; but

the judgment will determine the final destiny of the righteous and the wicked and will purify the kingdom entirely. The lesson is patient tolerance of the presence of the wicked in the community. God and His angels will sort them out in the end. This doesn't mean that nothing can be done about the evil in our midst, because weeds left unchecked can choke out the wheat. The Church needs constant reformation and positive action, including the quest for holiness, but it must avoid unrealistic purism – what is needed is that elusive thing called balance. “No one is so useless that they can't be used as a bad example.”

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