

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Our gospel today is from that extraordinary “Sermon in Parables” found in the 13th chapter of St. Matthew. Jesus is explaining for us “the Kingdom of Heaven” using these provocative and puzzling stories that seem to be his preferred manner of preaching.

From these stories we are able to distill certain key laws of the spiritual life. All three parables in today’s gospel emphasize the way that the Kingdom of God, God’s way of ordering things, coexists along side of elements and powers that are opposed to it. We hear of how the emergence of the Kingdom is sometimes gradual and slow, often accompanied by struggle with those things opposed to it.

Many religious people find this quite puzzling and hard to understand. After all, we are dealing with God here, who can do, presumably, whatever He wants to do. Why doesn’t God just get on with it and bring about the state of affairs that He desires? Why would the Kingdom have to struggle against opposing forces?

Well, let us look at each one of these little stories in turn and see what we can see.

In the first parable Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed his field with good seed. He finds when the crop came up, that an enemy had sown weeds amidst the wheat. His helpers suggest that the weeds be torn up. The man says no—you might tear up the wheat with them. So, let them grow together and we will separate them only at harvest time.

A simple story, that Jesus draws from his experience of the rural life in Palestine. It is a pictorial representation of a situation that we face all the time. Namely this, that the good is almost always everywhere intertwined with evil. Good so rarely exists simply in itself. And by the same token, evil rarely exists simply in itself. Rather, in society, in politics, in personal relationships, and in our own hearts, good and evil are intermingled. Things are hardly ever merely black and white; hardly ever simply a matter of good guys versus bad guys. Everything and everybody seems to be a mix of good and evil.

So the question is what do you do? What do you do when you find that the wheat is growing right alongside the weeds? Often the temptation is to isolate the evil and go after it—deal with it—get rid of it. BUT, this can be a dangerous procedure—like extracting a tumor that has wrapped itself around a vital organ.

And here we come to the heart of it. God allows good and evil, very often, to grow together—because an aggressive attack upon the evil can compromise the good.

We find the in the wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas these notions: Sometimes good and evil are so tightly interwoven that you couldn’t have certain goods without certain evils. The example he offers is that there would be no survival of the lion without the death of the antelope.

We could respond with let’s eliminate all violence from nature—eliminate all this terrible killing. But then you would also eliminate the life of the lion.

Thomas gives yet another example: there would be no virtue of the martyr without the cruelty of the tyrant. What an interesting and thought-provoking observation, is it not? We admire martyrs; we see their great virtue, their great power. But there would be no martyr were it not

for the cruelty of a tyrant. It is as though the two are just woven together and if you went after the tyranny, you might eliminate the martyr.

I know it seems odd to say it this way, yet, were it not for Hitler there would be no Edith Stein or Maximilian Kolbe. If it were not for certain adversities, certain goods would not arise. Please be assured, I am not saying that we should therefore leave a tyrant like Hitler alone, far from it. But this parable calls to mind and makes us consider situations throughout human history and our personal history in which good and evil were and are inextricably interconnected.

This parable makes us consider and ponder how the Kingdom of God is intertwined with those things opposed to it and how we should prayerfully and patiently seek God's grace in dealing with it.

Looking at the very familiar second parable, we hear Jesus say: the Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a person took and sowed in a field and it grew to be this great shrub. It seems to be a law of the spiritual life that God wants things to start small and to grow over time. God wants even the best things, His Kingdom, to start small and to grow over time. Again we are tempted to say—You are God—get on with it! Just do it! Why are we messing around with little mustard seeds and these long processes of growth? Why would God work this way?

It is common place in the Bible that God rejoices in our cooperation. Yes! God could do whatever He wants—but He delights in involving us: our freedom, our intelligence, and our creativity in what He is doing. And so, He plants the seeds but He then invites us to cultivate them. Does that take time? Yes, certainly it does! Does that mean things begin small and then grow? Yes, again!

God said to St. Francis of Assisi: Francis, rebuild my Church—but God is God—He could have rebuilt His Church in the twinkling of an eye! But, He wanted Francis involved. What started very small grew into the great Franciscan Order. God could have renewed the spiritual life of early Christianity through one great infusion of grace, but rather, He inspired Anthony to leave everything behind and go to live in the desert. And from that little seed there grew, only after many, many centuries, all of the monastic tradition in the Church.

In addition to this, when things begin small, they can fly under the radar for a time, while they gain strength, heft, and seriousness. And those involved can be tested and tried. This is a great spiritual principle throughout the Bible.

Suppose you want to do something great in the life of the Church. You begin with prayer and God gives you massively what you want—gives you everything right away. Well, you might not be ready. The people working with you might not be ready. Rather, God likes to begin things small while those involved deepen, strengthen, and grow in grace.

Finally, we have the parable of the yeast and the wheat flour. The yeast is kneaded into the flour and causes the bread to rise. Here again, we have a basic Biblical principle: *the enemy is best defeated by subterfuge and infiltration, rather than by direct confrontation.* (Repeat) Think of Moses and Joseph in Egypt. Think of Daniel and Esther in Babylon: Israelites behind enemy lines learning the ways of the enemy culture in order to infiltrate it, in order to undermine it from within; the way you would knead the yeast into the dough to make it rise.

Why is this advantageous? It is because God's purpose is not to destroy the enemy but to change him; not to destroy the enemy culture but to convert it. Why doesn't God just eliminate his enemies—get rid of them? It is because God loves His enemies!

And so, the Church's purpose is not so much to line up in direct battle so as to destroy its enemies—NO! The Church's role is to quietly, gradually, and in the spirit of love, to infiltrate so as to undermine, and to transform and convert from within.

The things we have considered in these three parables are:

- that the Kingdom of God coexists alongside things that are opposed to it and that good and evil are often intricately intertwined;
- that the Kingdom of God starts small and grows slowly;
- that the Kingdom of God quietly infiltrates what surrounds it and transforms it.

We have received three spiritual lessons that we can draw from this:

- Pray for the coming of the Kingdom, even as it works its way in the midst of the evil that surrounds it.
- Be unafraid and without anxiety to start small and grow slowly.
- Trust in the Lord and work to change the hearts of those who oppose God and his Kingdom.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella