

16th Sunday of the Year (A) – Our Judging and our Judgement

The picture Jesus draws in this parable would be quite clear and familiar to a Palestinian audience of his day. Tares were one of the curses against which the farmer had to labour.

The tares were a weed also called bearded darnel. In their early stages the tares so closely resembled the wheat that it was impossible to distinguish one from the other. When both had 'headed out' it was easy to distinguish them; but by that time the roots of the wheat and the tares were so intertwined that the tares could not be pulled up and weeded out without tearing the wheat out with them.

The wheat and tares could not be safely separated when both were growing but in the end they had to be separated. The separation had to be made because the grain of the bearded darnel is slightly poisonous. It causes dizziness and sickness and is narcotic in its effects, and even a small amount of it has a bitter and unpleasant taste.

So: the darnel in its early stages is indistinguishable from the wheat, but in the end it has to be laboriously separated from the wheat or the consequences are serious.

The picture of a man deliberately sowing darnel in someone else's field is by no means only imagination. That was actually sometimes done. To this day in India one of the direct threats which a man can make to his enemy is 'I will sow bad seed in your field'. And in codified Roman law this crime is mentioned and forbidden and its punishment laid down.

It may well be said that in its several lessons this is one of the most practical parables that Jesus ever told:

It teaches us that there is always a hostile power in the world, seeking and waiting to destroy the good seed. Our experience of life is that both kinds of influence act upon our lives: the influence which will help the seed of the word to flourish and to grow; and the influence which will seek to destroy the good seed before it can produce fruit at all. It is the lesson of life that we must be for ever on our guard.

It teaches us how hard it is to distinguish between those who are in the Kingdom and those who are not. A man may appear to be a good man, and may in fact be a bad man; and a man may appear to be a bad man, and may yet be a good man.

It may well be – in fact it certainly is – that we are much too quick to classify people and to label them good or bad without knowing all the facts, and without the necessary knowledge.

It teaches us not to be so quick with our judgements. If the reapers had had their way, they would have tried to tear out the darnel, and the only result would be that they would have torn out the wheat as well. Judgement had to wait until the harvest came. A man in the end will be judged, not by any single act or stage in his life, but by his whole life.

Judgement cannot come until the end. A man may make a great mistake, and then redeem himself and, by the grace of God, atone for it by making the rest of life a lovely thing. A man may live an honourable life and then in the end wreck it by a sudden collapse into sin. No one who only sees the part of a thing can judge the whole thing; and no one who knows only a part of a man's life can judge the whole man.

It teaches us that judgement does come in the end. Judgement is not hasty, but judgement does come. The separation of the good and the bad does come in the end. It may be that, humanly speaking, in this life the sinner seems to escape the consequences, but there is a life to come. It may be that, humanly speaking, goodness never seems to enter into its reward, but there is a new world to redress the balance of the old.

It teaches us that the only person with the right to judge is God. It is God alone who can discern the good and the bad; it is God alone who sees all of a man and all of a man's life. It is God alone who can judge.

So then, ultimately this parable is two things – it is a warning to us not to judge other people at all, and it is a warning to us that in the end there comes the judgement of God.