

045: Sixteenth Sunday of the Year A (2023)

The wheat and the weeds

The field in today's Gospel parable is often seen as the world, that is inhabited by both good people and bad people, who exist side by side (like the wheat and the weeds in the field). At the end of time there will be a separation, with the good people being taken up into the barn of heaven, and the bad people gathered up and thrown into the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth.

Personally, I don't like this interpretation of the parable, because it is far too simplistic to divide human beings into good people and bad people. The reality is far more complex. In truth, we are all a mixture of good and bad. There is no person on this earth who is pure goodness and no person who is pure evil. I often say that there is a little bit of good in the worst of us and a little bit of bad in the best of us. Most people, and I include all of you in this, are much more good than bad but none of us are perfect.

So in this parable, I prefer to see myself as the whole field. To recognise that I am a mixture of wheat and weeds. There is much in me that is pure wheat, that is good and nourishing and life-giving for others, but there are also some weeds within me that inhibit the growth of the wheat and lessen the abundance of the harvest.

In this parable, God makes a promise to me, and to you, 'at the harvest time. I will remove from you everything that is not wheat and destroy it forever.' That day will be the day on which my life on this earth ends. In the transforming experience of death, a purgation, a purification, will occur, and I will be taken up into heaven as pure wheat.

In this parable the workers want to pull up the weeds as soon as they appear, but the owner says, 'no, wait until the harvest time.' Similarly, I would like the Lord to remove all the weeds within me now. But the Lord also says, 'no'. Why?

I can suggest some reasons. In the early stages of growth, the wheat and the weeds look very similar. It is not easy to judge what is wheat and what is a weed. There may be some aspect of myself that I consider a weed – a thorn in the flesh, as St Paul describes it – but it may in fact be a precious element of myself.

Also, as the roots of the wheat and the weeds are often entangled, when we pull out a weed, a stalk of precious wheat may be dislodged with it.

In some strange way, the weeds in our life serve a purpose. Perhaps for ourselves, the weeds within us keep us a bit uncomfortable, stop us getting smug, keep us humble and compassionate, and help us to always realise our need for a saviour.

We also need to recognise that weeds are part of God's creation. Following a tragedy like an earthquake or the destruction of a town in war, the first signs of life to appear are often weeds that manage to take root and grow in the cracks of the rubble. The weeds offer the first signs of life returning.

So, we pray: Lord, I thank you for the wonderful, mysterious gift of myself. For the good that is in me, and the amazing fruit it produces. The weeds frustrate me, but I accept that they remain for a reason, perhaps one I don't understand at this time. I rejoice in your promise that one day, as pure wheat, you will bring me to the eternal joy of heaven.

Fr Michael Goonan SSP

This is not for the sermon

~~Another thing we can say about weeds is that they are persistent. We can spend a lot of time weeding a garden bed, but if we ignore it for the next six months, the garden bed will be overrun by weeds once again.~~