

Sunday 17

For the last three Sundays we have been reading from the 13th ch. of Matthew's Gospel where Jesus speaks to his contemporaries by means of parables. We all know what a parable is. It is a story about some concrete activity like planting seeds or finding a treasure in a field or finding the perfect pearl. But there are some other things we might now know about the Lord's parables. For instance, usually a parable has one point to make. For instance, in the parables about finding a hidden treasure or the absolutely perfect pearl, the point is that the treasure or the pearl is of such overwhelming value that those finding them, out of sheer joy, sell all their possessions in order to be able to buy them.

Have we ever experienced this kind of action in our own lives? If we are married or if we have taken religious vows, I would say we have. People who marry promise to be true to each other in good times and in bad, that is, in all the different circumstances of their lives, and to do so all the days of their lives or, even more coldly stated, until death bids them part. Thus they are selling all they have, their very lives, their very selves, in order to gain the love of their beloved. And that is also true of the person who takes religious vows. And so it is, the Lord tells us, with finding the

Kingdom of God. When we realize how wonderful it is we are able and willing to give everything to gain it.

Clearly these two parables tell a story of joy. And that is also true of the parable about a man planting seed everywhere, even where the seed has no chance to grow. For this parable claims that despite all this waste there will be a magnificent harvest.

That is also true of that other parable about a man who planted good seed but is now told that weeds are growing up among them. Here too there will be a great harvest, but one which will come only after the owner allows the weeds and wheat to grow together and finally reveal themselves in their true colors, as weeds or as wheat.

Our third parable today is like the other parables when it says that the net which God casts is a very broad one which includes both good and bad fish. For that is like the sower sowing seed everywhere and like the owner advising that the weeds be allowed to grow with the wheat. It is also like these parables when it talks about the bad fish being thrown away, for the weeds will ultimately be torn up and discarded and the seed that fell on the rocks or among the thorns will also wither and die.

Nevertheless the emphasis at its end seems more negative. The rewards the good will receive are not mentioned, but the punishment the evil will receive is: “The angels will go out and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.” Oh yes, we can go back a few verses where the Lord uses this same punishing language when he describes what will happen to the weeds, that is, those who did evil, but there he then added: “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (13:43). But he does not add these comforting words here at the end of this third parable. However, we should not make too much of this because we are told that there is a separation of the good from the bad, and that means of course that the good will not suffer the same fate as the wicked.

When we add all this up, what do we have? Should we say that the Lord’s parables, in nine out of ten cases, are stories of joy and promise, of hope and of goodness triumphing over evil in the end? Yes, I am going to say. But we cannot overlook the darker tones that appear in them. There is loss, there is rejection, there is death. The seeds sown on poor soil or among the thorns do not survive. Nor do the weeds. Nor do the bad fish. There is judgment at the

end of some of these parables, and for some that is good news, but for others it is bad news. We live at a time when everything in our culture and even in our understanding of our faith emphasizes mercy and goodness. Therefore some of us find it hard to accept these darker tones when they appear in the Lord's words and in our public prayers. I think of one offertory prayer given in the Masses for the dead: "As we humbly present to you these sacrificial offering, O Lord, for the salvation of your servant, we beseech your mercy, that he (she) who did not doubt your Son to be a loving Savior, may find in him a merciful Judge." A loving savior, a merciful judge. Christian art has often portrayed Jesus as the merciful judge, merciful but judge, one who separates the weeds from the wheat, one who separates the good fish from the bad. Do we believe that? Or do we really believe that in the end the all-merciful judge will be in fact all-merciful, will make wheat out of the weeds, will make the bad fish good? As far as I understand it, our faith says he will not do that. If the weeds have consciously chosen to be weeds, if the bad fish have consciously chosen to be bad fish, he will respect their choice. He will respect their use of their freedom and let them go their own way. And that is why our lives are serious and important.

And so we pray that we will be given the wisdom of Solomon and chose the right way. We pray that we will accept the Lord's call to be made just and to be glorified.