

Sunday 16

Did you ever hear the story about Pope John XXIII when he was asked one day about how many people worked at the Vatican? Supposedly he answered: “About half.” Do you get that? He was making a joke. Or so we hope. He was saying that if there were 500 employees at the Vatican, about 250 really didn’t do much, or even nothing at all. Pope John had a good sense of humor. I can imagine him delivering his answer with a bright twinkle in his eye and a soft tone to his voice inviting laughter on the part of his hearers. And maybe they responded with a roar. Here was the pope tweaking the Vatican work force. Here was the boss letting his employees know that he knew what they were or were not up to.

But if there were Americans among his hearers, while they might have enjoyed his little joke, they might have also been thinking very different thoughts, thoughts of a more practical nature. They might have been saying to themselves: “Why doesn’t he do something about this situation? He is the boss, the absolute pope in the Vatican. He can do what he wants. Why doesn’t he clean up this situation? Why doesn’t he reduce his work force by half? Why doesn’t he fire those who do nothing?”

That is a reasonable way of thinking, is it not? That is the way a boss in the world of business would think and act, and out of necessity if his or her business were to make a profit and continue in existence. But Pope John didn't think that way. Why? I am going to wager that somewhere in the back of his mind—or maybe in the front of his mind—this parable of the wheat and the weeds was having its influence on him. Like the farmer in today's parable, the pope did not feel that the time was right for such an action. No, he needed more time before he could act. He would be patient.

I am presuming that the point of this parable is that timing is everything. Things need time to develop. In their beginning stages some things cannot be distinguished from other things which appear to be very much like them. In the terms of the parable, weeds and wheat are indistinguishable from each other in the early stages of their growth. So if you tear up what looks like a weed in these early stages you may in fact be tearing up wheat. Later on, they are clearly different and distinguishable from each other. Then the owner of the field can send out his workers to separate the weeds from the wheat. Then it is harvest time.

The Lord Jesus is of course not talking about farming. Or, rather, he is talking about farming but he does so to talk about something else. What is this something else? An example from the Scriptures themselves comes to mind. In Luke's Gospel, ch. 9, we are told that Jesus has decided to go journey to Jerusalem. He sends messengers ahead of him to prepare for his coming. But a Samaritan village would not welcome him because he was on his way to Jerusalem, the enemy of the Samaritans. James and John, the sons of thunder, they are called, then say to him, "Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them? Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they journeyed to another village." Now is not the time for such dramatic action, the Lord is telling the sons of thunder, as he leads them on to another village other than the Samaritan one which would not accept him. And we can imagine the Lord saying to himself, "When will these two ever learn?"

Today's parable teaches us to be slow in acting, to let things ripen, to give things a chance to develop so that we can clearly see whether we are dealing with weeds or with wheat.

How often in our lives have we seen that what at first seemed to be an evil turned out to be a blessing. Maybe we didn't get the job we

wanted and had to accept another job. But at this second job we met our spouse. There are all sorts of stories and sayings which teach us this same lesson. So we should reflect on our lives and thank God for the problems and defeats we have had but which later became the cause of our happiness, of our blessings. And if we had the wisdom, the patience, to let this happen in our lives, if we were patient in our trials and gave God the time to turn things around for us, then it is time for us to thank God that we were given the grace to be patient and wise in those situations.

The Lord Jesus may have addressed this parable to those who were wondering why he was not meeting with much success. The scribes and Pharisees were rejecting his message that the Kingdom of God was breathing down their necks, creating an entirely new situation for them, precisely because he was among them, preaching and healing. Despite their rejection Jesus plodded on. The early church took his parable and applied it to its own situation. It was suffering rejection and even persecution from the larger society, and moral failures among its own members. The answer in both cases was the same: Be patient. Things have to develop. The church outlived the persecutions of the Roman Empire. Indeed, the blood of martyrs became the good seeds which produced future Christians. And the moral failures of church

members has brought about reformation and reform in the church in each age.

Where are we at this moment in our lives as individuals, as a church, and as a church existing in the world today? In all three cases this much is clear: things are still developing. So let us be diligent, but let us also be patient.