

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Wisdom 12.13, 16-19)

The Leniency of God

The Book of Wisdom was written in Greek, shortly before the birth of Jesus, for the Greek-speaking Jews of Alexandria. Much of it concerns the harsh treatment of the Hebrews in Egypt before the Exodus under Moses.

Here the author has moved on to describe luridly the depravity of the inhabitants of Canaan before the Israelites arrived in the Holy Land. Nevertheless, God cared for them and treated them with leniency, giving them opportunity for repentance.

This has two lessons for the readers of the Book: first, they too must pardon the sinner and be kindly with God's own kindness. Second, God always gives a chance to repent of sins and follies, and this applies to us, too. This leniency is a sign of God's strength. Leniency and generosity are always signs of strength rather than of weakness, just as it is always the stronger person who apologizes first.

The reading is appointed to be read today in order to pair with the gospel reading, emphasizing a possible reading of the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel: the owner of the field leaves the darnel in place until harvest, that is, until the final judgment, thus leaving the wicked a chance to repent

Question:

Is God's forgiveness really a sign of divine strength?

Second reading:

(Romans 8.26-27)

Prayer in the Spirit

This is an encouraging confirmation by Paul that, when we pray, our own miserable prayers are supplemented by the Spirit of Christ praying within us.

What does this mean? Is Paul referring to praying in tongues, which certainly occurred in his Corinthian community? He himself says that he had the gift also, although he did not frequently exercise it. It is surely wider than this.

If we pray to praise the glory of God and give thanks for God's kindness to us, our own prayer can only be inadequate; but it is supercharged by the Spirit. Our prayer of repentance likewise, for our repentance can never be adequate. The same with our protestations of loyalty and commitment.

What about our prayer of petition? We pray desperately for a fine evening for the barbeque (or for rain for the garden), but perhaps the Spirit deepens this prayer to our real profound desire to be brought nearer to God by whatever he decides is best for us and those for whom we care! 'The prayers that the Spirit makes for God's holy people are always in accordance with the mind of God' - they go beyond our petty and ephemeral requests, for Christ is praying within us

Question:

Does this make a difference to the way we pray?

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Gospel:

(Matthew 13.24-43)

Parables of Growth

The Gospel of Matthew gathers together a whole set of pictures that Jesus used to describe the society of God's servants he was intent on setting up. Matthew calls it 'the Kingdom of Heaven'. Jews avoided bandying around the name of 'God', so Matthew calls it by the place where God is enthroned, heaven.

The first picture, the wheat and the darnel, shows that in some of those called the good seed has been overlaid by weed. In its early growth, this weed, the inedible darnel, is incredibly difficult for a non-farmer to distinguish from good barley. No more can we presume to sort out who is seeking God and who is not; it is dangerous to despise or to dismiss anyone at all. The explanation given by Matthew constitutes a warning that the harvest, the judgment, will come in the end.

The other two pictures form a pair. A mustard seed is but a tiny grain, but shoots up in a few months to form a big plant. So a pinch of yeast makes a whole loaf of bread rise. Jesus could have told these to his disciples when they were depressed: 'Cheer up! Even a spark of goodwill can set a whole forest ablaze!'

Reflection:

What do you learn from these parables about the Kingdom of God?
