

This Week's Readings – the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time – The themes of today's readings are patience and leniency.

The first reading is from the Book of Wisdom, which is part of the Deutero-Canonical (Second Canon) Books of the Bible, which are only recognized by the Catholic Church. It was written in Greek approximately 100 years or less before the birth of Christ. The author, who is unknown, was most probably a Greek Jew living in Alexandria, Egypt. At times, he takes on the persona of Solomon (7:5, 8:21, and 9:7). This was done primarily because Solomon was regarded as the wisest King of Israel. Thus, this book is sometimes referred to as the Wisdom of Solomon. At this time, especially in Alexandria, many Jews had been assimilated into the predominant pagan culture. The Book of Wisdom was written as a "wake-up call" to those Jews. This particular section, which is called "A Digression on God's Mercy" describes God as a just and righteous God, not one to be feared. Note that this section is addressed directly to God. The God of Israel is so powerful that He does not have to resort to violence and retribution as the pagan gods. This is a merciful and just God who "permits repentance" for the sins of the people. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* shows how this reading connects with the Gospel reading from Matthew – "The caption to this passage highlights the idea of repentance. From the parables in today's gospel, however, it appears that the real reason for the choice of this passage was to reinforce the notion of God's forbearance: "Thou who art sovereign in strength dost judge *with mildness*, and with *great forbearance* thou dost govern us" (v. 18). God's care, it says, is for all people, and even for the tares among the wheat. "Thy sovereignty over all causes thee to spare all" (v. 16)".

This message is further carried forth in the passage from Matthew's Gospel. This is a continuation of last week's Gospel and basically follows the same format as last week's Gospel. Here we read the very familiar parable of the sower (Jesus), who sows good seed but who is sabotaged by one (Satan) who sows weeds in his field. This parable is found only in Matthew. The weed referred to here is darnel, which is poisonous. It also resembles wheat in its early stages of development - deception. Again, Jesus is the sower who spreads the Word of the Kingdom of Heaven. The wheat represents those who are good and the weeds, not only represent those who are bad but also those who influence others to sin. Therefore, the weeds are not removed, lest they damage the wheat - patience. At harvest (the End Time), the wheat and the weeds will be separated and the weeds burned. Jesus lesson is this – there will always be good people and bad people. However, only God, not us, can judge who is good and who is evil. Then there are those who repent their sins – weeds are not always bad. Remember that Jesus preached primarily to those in need of repentance. This demonstrates not only God's patience and leniency but also His justice and forbearance. Why does Jesus use so many different parables (Weeds among the Wheat, The Mustard Seed, and the Yeast) to describe "The Kingdom of Heaven"? Fr. Roger Karban in his 2005 syndicated column for *The Evangelist* explains – "The Gospels clearly teach that Jesus had problems trying to convey His ideas about God present and working in our lives. (He usually refers to that divine event as the "kingdom of God" or the "kingdom of heaven.") It still isn't an easy concept for us to appreciate 2,000 years later. We know God's here among us, but we

don't always mesh our ideas on the subject with those of Jesus. Our ideas probably come not so much from Scripture as from a sermon we once heard, or a question and answer we memorized in a long past catechism class. Above all, Jesus believed there was no one way to perfectly describe how God is among us. We who "think Greek" find that concept difficult to comprehend. We're constantly analyzing; mentally tearing apart things, situations and people; getting rid of contradictions; and eventually coming up with either/or proposals. Jesus and the Semitic people He taught did the opposite when they thought. They synthesized and brought different concepts together in their brain at the same time, coming up with both/and conclusions and always enjoying contradictions. That's why, when Matthew's Jesus tries to describe the kingdom of heaven, He not only falls back on parables, but He's also forced to employ a mixture of concepts in His stories (Mt 13: 24-43). No one idea or explanation can adequately convey the experience He's had of God working in His life. Notice the diversity of images in the Gospel: good and bad seed growing in the same field, and the farmer letting it grow side by side until harvest. The message: God's presence doesn't automatically eradicate all the evil in our lives. Besides, God's actions don't rush in and overpower us. Just as a small mustard seed or a minute piece of yeast eventually grows much larger than its original size, so God's kingdom slowly, almost imperceptibly, grows among and in us. We need lots of hope and patience to hang in there with God".

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* adds these cultural comments on today's Gospel reading – "Experts describe Mediterranean society as *agonistic*, that is, hostile and conflict-oriented. Today's opening parable is an illustration of this feature. An enemy has sowed weeds among the wheat. The fact is mentioned without comment. Jesus' audience understood this perfectly. Birth into a family means not only inheriting that family's honor status and its friends but also inheriting its enemies. There are many reasons why families become enemies in the ancient world, but the consequences are always the same. A state of feuding develops and persists over a long period of time. One never knows but must always suspect that a feuding enemy is seeking to shame one's family. In this story, the shame is planted soon after the wheat seeds are sown, but it does not become full-blown shame until the weeds have matured to the point where they are clearly distinguishable from the wheat. Now the entire village discovers the shame along with the landowner, and they begin to laugh. The laughter grows even louder when the landowner instructs his servants to allow the weeds to grow alongside the wheat until harvest. The peasants expect retaliation and revenge. Instead, the landowner appears helpless and bested by his enemies. Before the invention of electricity and television, such feuds provided entertainment for the village. But appearances are deceiving. The landowner is shrewd as well as being a savvy farmer. He knows that the wheat is strong enough to tolerate the weeds' competition for nutrition and irrigation. After the harvest, the landowner will not only have grain for his barns, but extra, unanticipated fuel for his needs. Instead of shaming this landowner, the weed strategy has backfired and shamed the enemy. The landowner and his servants have the last laugh. The enemy bent on shaming others is shamed instead! There is an interesting lesson here. Once again, Jesus' peasant audience recognized that this was not a lesson in agriculture. It may have been a lesson about cultural values. The "something other" or "something more" of this parable may well be the landowner's refusal to retaliate, to get

even with the enemy. In a society dedicated to revenge, the landowner's victory by seeming to do nothing is a powerful lesson. The confidence of the landowner that his wheat will survive the effect of the weeds is worth pondering. A trust in goodness that is greater than the fear of wickedness could be a powerful weapon against rampant, senseless violence. It has worked before in history, and could work again if given a chance".

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