

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)  
(Wisdom 12:13.16-19 / Matthew 13: 24-43)  
23.07.2017

In the better known parable on the sower found at the beginning of chapter 13 of Matthew's gospel Jesus makes the point that the field in which the seed is sown is our hearts. This is just as true when it comes to the parable of the wheat and the darnel read for us today.

This leads me to want to reflect with you this morning on the state of our hearts.

The first thing I would say about our hearts is that they are divided.

The truth is that we are all pulled in this way and that. We feel our hearts' divisions more or less acutely at different periods of our lives.

While we want to bear only good fruit in our lives, an abundance of wheat, inevitably darnel will also raise its head within us.

The parable heard this morning implies that the wheat is sown by the Lord Himself, while the darnel produced alongside it is the work of the one Jesus calls *the enemy*.

Clearly, there are opposing forces, counter energies, at work in our lives.

The seed sown by *the enemy* works against and tries to detract from the good within us.

Let's face it, we all struggle with what the playwright Brian Friel calls *The Enemy Within*.

There is a combat raging between the opposing forces which confront each other deep down within us. In his wonderful play on the life of St Columba, Friel speaks of this enemy being *no stranger to us*. He says: *the enemy is of our own household*.

Someone has taken this thought one step further claiming: *We are all confronted with an enemy and the enemy is us*.

Another way of putting that would be to say: *There is civil war going on within us*. A civil war is not a war between two different nations, but war within one people. *The civil war within us* is that conflict which is to be found in our own person – those contradictions which inhabit our inner self and divide us at the deepest levels of our being.

I find today's gospel passage somewhat consoling. It makes the point that both wheat and darnel have taken root and that they will both be there to the very end. The field of our lives is never just one or the other, but always the two.

In the light of what I have just said, let's look at our own personal lives for a moment – let's dare to scrutinise them.

I'm pretty sure that most – if not all – of us who are here this morning would say that we would like to be more spiritually focused, to be praying better than we are, walking more closely with the Lord, living our lives more positively, journeying in the light, in better harmony within ourselves and more finely attuned to others.

I guess we would prefer to be less frequently pulled away from ourselves, not as distracted, to be at a lesser distance from the centre of our being.

Yes, I'm pretty sure most of us – if not all of us – would like to have it *all more together within*, to be more fully *with ourselves*, to be less disturbed by those inner voices that nag at us, drag us down and draw us away from that state of deep interior peace, which, when we touch it, we know to be the place where we are meant to be, enjoying true well-being.

None of us has to go far to recognise how darnel sown by *the enemy* is inclined to raise its ugly head among the wheat of our lives. This darnel manifests itself in all those negative thoughts and emotions that so easily invade us and take us over, poisoning our mindsets.

I repeat what I said at the outset: we all struggle; we are all of us broken; we are all of us wounded persons; each one of us is divided within.

I know this is to be true for myself. I would like to think that you can recognise this to be the case for yourselves as well, for, to deny that this is how things are for us, is more worrying than to have to admit that such is the case. It is to be living a lie.

There are times when it is nothing less than a cry of deep distress and a near readiness to give up on life altogether, that emerge from deep down within us.

At such time we are inclined to echo both the Psalmist and the apostle Paul: *Oh wretched person that I am.*

When the sort of thoughts that led both those men of God (Psalmist and apostle) to express themselves thus we should not panic, but, of course, so often we do.

Let's de-dramatise our feelings.

If the Psalmist and the apostle felt this way, why wouldn't we? What makes us think we shouldn't?

I think many of us are inclined to imagine that if we were true Christians then we would have outgrown our struggles and resolved all the many conflicts that raise their ugly heads and rage within us.

Jesus' parable consoles us, for it points out to us that we have to live with our contradictions to the very end!

And so, we should never allow ourselves be so overwhelmed by the troubles that assail us that we lose hope.

Even though there will be times when the struggles we are led to endure will prove to be particularly arduous, and we may be tempted to throw in the rag as a result, we should never do so.

When we are particularly tired and weary – when we feel hemmed in on every side – maybe all that we can muster is the cry: *I give up, I'm defeated.* The cry is understandable, but the giving up is not permitted.

We would better say: *Lord help me. Lord, rescue me. Lord, hold on to my life. Lord, see me through.*

While surrender to the Lord is a good thing and even essential, to allow ourselves to be defeated by *the enemy* is not good. It goes against the victory that has been won for us by Jesus Crucified and Risen – a victory that is ours. We should never forget that a share in Christ's risen life is assured to each one of us.

Reading the word of God addressed to us today, I'm inclined to think of the experience of the apostle Paul which is shared with us in chapter 7 of his Letter to the Romans.

In some well-known verses of that chapter of his epistle to the Christians of Rome, the apostle articulates so well what we all feel at times when he says: *That which I want to do, I do not do and that which I hate to do is exactly what I do.*

We may be inclined to think that we should have outgrown our inner conflicts by now. Some of us might be inclined to think that while the kind of admission made in Romans 7 would be

kind of understandable and excusable in some crazy mixed up kid, it is hardly worthy of a mature Christian. I suspect many of us believe that mature Christians should *have it all together* in their lives. This can lead us to say to ourselves – listening to the inner voice of darkness which only discourages us: *Surely to God I should no longer be struggling the way I am, with so much darnel raising its ugly head here, there and everywhere in the wheat field of my life.*

We can be so frustrated to find ourselves struggling with the same old demons that have been part of the landscape for the quasi-total duration of our lives.

I often think back to something the late Conon Joey O'Hagan said to me when he was about one hundred years old: *I've discovered looking at myself and others I know well, that it is, by and large, the same basic things we all continue to struggle with right through to the end.* I wasn't going to argue with someone who had a century of experience behind him! My own experience resonates with what he said.

It was not an adolescent who wrote the words: *That which I want to do, I do not do and that which I hate is exactly what I do.* The apostle who shared his experience in those words was a mature Christian leader – a man who had given his heart to the Lord for a considerable time, one who was nearing the end of a life of selfless ministry in the service of God's people. It was a mature Paul who struggled, not some crisis-ridden teenager.

Paul wasn't someone who had shown only a half-hearted commitment to Christ. There was great stamina in his engagement in the Christian way. He had been through a lot to prove this. He names some of the things he was led to traverse: *imprisonment for the faith, floggings, stoning, shipwreck, freezing cold conditions, hunger, false friends, people who let him down etc.* When we consider all this, is it not demonstrated for us that the struggles we endure in life are perhaps more a sign of Christian maturity than indicators of immaturity in the faith?

I think it is fair to say that an awareness of our on-going struggle with evil – those trials which are inherent to all our lives – is actually the hallmark of mature Christian discipleship.

All the great spiritual teachers insist upon the importance of self-awareness for mature Christian living.

What is required of mature Christians is a true self-appraisal, an honest assessment of who and what they are, with all that is going on within them – including an awareness of the fragility and brokenness which are an undeniable part of every person's lives.

It has been said – and rightly so – that *we all struggle with sin until the day we die.*

This leads me to insist once again that our spiritual combat is not a sign of Christian immaturity or an indicator of a weakness in our faith, but actually a sign of the authenticity of our engagement in the Christian way of life.

Think of Jesus' own spiritual combat – not just that which He experienced at the outset of His ministry in the desert where He was tempted for forty days and forty nights, but also of His struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of His passion and even that which He endured in what one film maker called *the last temptations of Christ* – those He underwent as He hung upon the cross.

It is implied in the gospel accounts that during His crucifixion Jesus struggled with the temptation to despair. His cry of desolation is recorded for us: *My God, my God, why have*

*You forsaken me?*

If Jesus felt abandoned by God in His final hour, He is not the last to have felt this way. Are there not times when we feel desolate, abandoned, forsaken in our hours of trial?

I repeat my conviction with monotonous regularity: we are all of us broken people – yes, all of us.

We may dream that our struggles should be behind us. We may imagine that the field of our lives should only produce wheat, without any trace of darnel, but this won't ever be the case until the final harvest of our lives has come about.

Only then, at that point, at the final hour, will the darnel be weeded out from our hearts and taken away from us so that we can live with and for God in a totally unhindered, uncontaminated way.

In the meantime, let's not be afraid to live in the real world, aware of everything that is going on inside us – including the various forms of struggle we are led to endure.

Let's draw heart from the thought that someone like the great apostle Paul at what was the apex of his life – when he was writing his epistle to the Romans, a final letter which is such a wonderful articulation of his theological insights – could with such candour and openness admit to his on-going struggles.

It is surely good for us to remember Paul's frank admission that he was caught between his desire to live according to God's will and his temptation to do things in contradiction with it.

Paul's testimony in Romans 7 is of great comfort to us when we are tempted to question ourselves, asking such things as these: *What is wrong with me? Why am I so divided within? Why am I forever disappointing the Lord and letting myself down?*

Before concluding this reflection I would like to say one thing more.

I would like to invite you to think with me for just a moment about what follows on in Paul's Letter to the Romans. In chapter 8 of this great epistle – having just admitted to his on-going struggle – the apostle goes on to speak of how *God's strength makes itself felt precisely in our human weakness*. (We find the same thought elsewhere in Paul's writings – in Corinthians particularly.) In Romans 8 Paul gives us the assurance that *the Holy Spirit comes to help us in our weakness*. He reminds us how the Lord is there for us all along the way. If this is true – and it is – then we can be confident that Christ in whom we place our hope will be there for us at the end.

True to His parting promise, Jesus is with us until the end of time – even as we struggle.

Our peace comes from the sure and certain knowledge that the One who is there with us is there *for* us – He is on our side... even as we find ourselves pulled in separate ways, caught up in, and sometimes nearly torn asunder by, our many contradictions.

We all have to realise that we have character flaws that are simply beyond our control. These should not frighten us, rather it should serve as a constant reminder to us of our humanity. We have a God who remembers who and what we are as human beings, even when we forget: images of Himself, His very own children.

The Psalmist tells us: *Our God is like a father to us, tender and sympathetic, full of compassion, tenderness, filled with love for those who reverence Him. He knows we are but dust, and that our days are few and brief.*

For Jesus Himself to assure us that He will winnow the wheat so that the chaff will fall away from it on to the threshing floor.

At the end, the Lord will separate the darnel from the wheat and cast the darnel aside to burn it so that it cannot affect us any more.

The wheat He then will take and consecrate fully to Himself. We are the wheat. An old Irish hymn reminds us of this.

Let us present ourselves to the Lord in this Eucharist, with the bread made from the wheat of the earth, so that we may be consecrated – so that Christ may become all in all in us.

Amen!