

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Today's readings deal with the balance between the mercy of God and divine justice. The ancient Hebrews had a fairly strict sense of justice and believed that God would also make sure that good people were rewarded and evil would be punished. The door was always open for the wicked to repent and change their ways, but it was seen as unfair if they got off scot-free.

Wisdom 12:13, 16-19 The book of Wisdom, often referred to as the Wisdom of Solomon, has been traditionally ascribed to King Solomon, mainly because he is seen as the father of Jewish wisdom. In fact, the book was written much later than the time of Solomon (900s BCE) by an anonymous writer who has adopted the persona of Solomon. It was most probably written sometime between 100 BC and 50 AD.

Today's extract is part of a poem in praise of the justice and benevolence of God. The poet declares that nothing happens without God's design or permission. He recalls that God showed mercy even to the Canaanites, which proves anyone at all can change (*metanoia* = change) and be granted forgiveness.

The writer makes a valid point that goodness is strength, and it is the strong who are capable of showing kindness and forgiveness. It is the psychologically sound who have nothing to prove and who can give in and allow others to 'win'. For the writer, it is God's strength that is the source of mildness and compassion. In our own day meekness and gentleness can be taken as weakness and yet even in the world of nature it is the strong who are usually the gentle.

Psalms 85/86 This psalm is also a song to God's compassion and readiness to forgive. The poet makes no criticism of the other nations who have their own gods and goddesses, but simply accepts that the Lord is supreme, in which case there is no need for expressions of rivalry or comparison. The psalmist is confident that one day the nations will come to appreciate the unique stature of the Hebrew God.

The Hebrew verb used in this psalm for forgive/forgiveness is *sallach*, and it is used only in reference to God's forgiveness. It does not apply to the forgiveness that humans might extend to each other. In reference to God, forgiveness can only follow a change of heart and a return to the Lord.

Romans 8:26-27 In this section of his letter to the Christians in Rome Paul is clearly writing about prayer of the heart. In our relationship with God there is no need for words, much less for grand speeches. A good many of us have been taught that saying 'prayers' and uttering words are the essence of our communication with God and yet Paul is saying that this can amount to babbling. God knows what is in our heart.

The prayer of listening is a valuable way of attuning ourselves to the mind of God.

Quality prayer is one of contemplation where we simply 'be' in the Presence and absorb the Spirit, without smothering the occasion with words. Another form of superlative prayer is to sit calmly with a piece of Scripture and hear God speaking to us. This can be a refreshing change from always making speeches to God. The prayer of listening is a valuable way of attuning ourselves to the mind of God.

The practice of *Lectio Divina* gives us the opportunity to expose ourselves to the word, not to figure it out but to let it flow through us as we might allow a piece of music or a poem or a small group of words to flow into our consciousness. This is the process of entering into a piece of Scripture rather than trying to figure it out.

Matthew 13:24-43 This gospel passage continues Matthew's collection of the parables of Jesus. Notice how the workers are upset that an enemy has come overnight and sown dandel among the wheat. Dandel is a poisonous weed organically related to wheat and hard to distinguish from wheat. In this scenario the weeds had grown enough to have their roots tangled up with the wheat plants so that trying to pull them out would risk uprooting the wheat.

This parable, like so many others, has a 'shock' element. How deep is the grudge or bitterness of the person who sows poisonous weeds in his neighbour's wheatfield? The intention seems to be to wreck the whole crop. Responding more calmly than his workers the master gives orders to let the two crops

grow together and the wheat will be sorted out at harvest time when the good grain will be preserved and the weeds destroyed by fire.

Reading this parable allegorically where every item in the story stands for some reality, we would be stunned by the harshness of the punishment meted out to the darnel. We might consider how the darnel is there by intention, not by accident. We could say it is determined, with malice, to ruin the wheat and is not taking any other considerations into account, so its comeuppance is pretty severe. Here is another instance of Jesus using a Semitic exaggeration to drive a point home. He does this fairly frequently.

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One takeaway from this is appreciating how our values and our intentions determine the shape of our thoughts and actions. If I am adamant about doing things Jesus' way I will be on the right track. In fact, he assures us that if we are in companionship with him we will find satisfaction: *'...learn from me, for I am gentle and humble (unpretentious) in heart, and you will find deep peace in your inmost being.'* (Matthew 11:29). Ignore this and take our life in another direction, down the road of self-service, and we will find grief and disappointment when we fail to achieve our potential and grow to wholeness. We will never be with Christ or against him by chance. There is no such thing as an accidental disciple of Jesus. It takes decision and commitment: *Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.* (Matthew 12:30)

The parable of the mustard seed contains a note of encouragement. Spreading the message of Jesus to bring more people into the realm of God might have small beginnings but the apparently insignificant efforts of Jesus and his followers will blossom into something remarkable. It is interesting that Jesus uses mustard seed in his parable because it is noxious and dangerous and yet here it grows into a comfortable roosting place for the birds. Something good has come from a suspicious beginning.

That birds will want to come and settle in the mustard tree with confidence and a sense of welcome is the kind of effect that our connection with others might produce. Have people come to our church community and commented on our welcoming hospitality? Do I make a point of reaching out to put people at ease – no big deal, a smile, a cheery 'hello' – these can have the magic of putting out welcome vibes to the Christ we see in others.



Success tends to bless those who are most committed to giving it the most attention.

Grant Cardone, author of *The 10x rule: The Difference Between Success and Failure*



The first few weeks at Weightwatchers you're just finding your feet.

If there had been three wise women who went to Bethlehem, they would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the table, made a meal and brought some practical gifts.

Laurie Woods