

Epiphany 5

I take as my text today from St. Matthew's Gospel:

Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

If you lived in the ancient world, in particular at the time of our Lord, you would have no difficulty in understanding the setting for this interesting parable, but the meaning may prove difficult to discern especially since in the passage that follows, Jesus finds it necessary to explain to his Disciples what it means.

The simple explanation is that the parable is a double warning: a warning, first, not to judge people, and second, that, in the end, there is God's Judgment.

The scene was quite familiar to the people gathered around listening to Jesus as he taught them. Tares were not uncommon and dealing with them was not an easy task.

From time-to-time, in the dark of night, a farmer's field might be sown with tares to settle a personal vendetta, or for some other evil purpose.

What are tares? Wee, they weren't just weeds but a particular type, called darnel, an insidious, noxious grain that had to be separated somehow from the good grain. The botanical name for darnel is *Lolium temulentum*, and it is often referred to as wheat's evil twin. The term for bad grain is tares while the good grain is referred to as wheat or corn.

Now, before the seed heads developed, it was difficult to distinguish between the weed and the good grain. But once the seed head appeared, the tares, darnel, became obvious. The seeds were slate-grey. They were bitter in taste and slightly poisonous if consumed. Often, the grain produced by the tares had to be separated by picking it out of the good grain. Efforts to uproot the tares would most likely destroy the good because the roots would become entangled as they grew together.

Now, Jesus used this scene to put forth a truth: only God is capable of judging a person, and he will, in the end, deliver his judgment.

If we hear correctly what Jesus is saying, the first thing that becomes clear is that there is an evil force in the world seeking to destroy that which is good. And we, just as the farmer, must be on our guard against the evil influences on our lives, against the sower of tares that can entangle our lives.

The second thing that emerges from the parable is that, just as it is difficult to distinguish the tares from the good seed, so it is difficult for us to distinguish between people, the good and the bad, as appearances are too often deceiving.

A person may appear to be good but within is filled with evil. While another might appear not to be good but that person within might abound in good. For example, how many times have you encountered someone who seemed to be obnoxious and hard to deal with, only to learn, once you have gotten to know them, that they were, indeed, not who they appeared to be.

The opposite is also true. Surely, we have all encountered the person who gives the impression that they are above reproach, when, in actuality, they stand ready to, as the expression goes, *stab you in the back*.

We do, quite frequently, face the dilemma of sorting out the good from the bad. Not easy for us to do as we cannot see into a person's heart; only God can.

While we must discern the good from the bad, we must also remember not to be too quick to label people. That is another lesson that comes from this parable.

Remember, if the farmer had sent workers out into the field to try to remove the tares before they matured, the end result might very well be the destruction of the whole crop, good grain and bad grain together.

The harvest will come but, in the meantime, the grain must grow and mature, whether good or bad, so it can be separated in the end.

We are like that. We must grow and mature. During our lives, we will inevitably do something that, in the sight of God, is bad, maybe even evil; but it doesn't mean the end. We have time and opportunity to amend our lives; to right wrongs; to repent, so to speak, and make our paths straight as we travel through life.

Yes, we all make mistakes but, through the Grace of God, we can overcome and correct our mistakes, and, in the end, be distinguished from the tares by our fruits, the total product of our lives. That is how we are judged: by the totality of our lives lived. So, another lesson from the parable: we cannot judge another person's life just by what we see, for we see only partly.

Thus, we know that judgment will come in the end; not hastily but in good time, when the grain has matured and is ready for the harvest. It will come, not by our peers, but by God alone, who has seen the whole of our lives.

His judgment will be dispensed with love; love that passes our understanding.

Though God does not want to lose any of his creation, still he will separate the good from the bad.

When the time comes for the harvest, our Lord will send the reapers into the fields, and he will separate the tares from the wheat, that is, the bad from the good, and gather the good grain into his barn, our heavenly home.

God knows what is in our hearts and our potential for good. He has provided a way for us to reach that potential despite the tares and find salvation. That way is Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the light in the darkness; he sustains us in our journey with his Body and Blood; he is the well from which we drink; he has stretched out his arms in love; and he is the gate through which we must pass into eternal life. Not for one moment must we forget that God is Love.