

16TH SUNDAY A 2020

What is the kingdom of heaven? Jesus likens it to these several parables (man who sowed good seed, mustard seed, yeast) but still does not say explicitly what it is.

There is the temptation sometimes (especially within Anglophone cultures) to think that the kingdom of heaven is something *we* do; it is something *we* are attempting to bring upon earth by our Christian living and right actions. In fact, we sometimes even sing about it in some of our old folk hymns from the 70s: 'let us build a city of God' and such like. On one level, there is an element of truth in that: we are obviously called to cooperate with the will of God and through our actions help bring peace and justice to our own lives and to the wider world.

However, it is not the whole truth about the kingdom of God or heaven. Indeed, it is not the main truth about the kingdom of heaven either. The main truth about the kingdom of heaven is that it is not something *we* do but something that *God* has done and continues to do in Jesus Christ. What is the kingdom of heaven? It is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Salvation only comes through Him, not through our own merits – although our vocation is, of course, to participate in the life of Christ by bringing his love, justice and peace to the world.

When we realise this, when we put God at the centre of the parables rather than ourselves, things usually become clearer. This is why Jesus has to take the disciples aside and explain to them what the parables are about. They are not primarily about what he is asking *them* to do; they are about what *he* is doing, and by invitation and extension, he will ask them to continue in his name.

So what, then, is it that God has done for us in Jesus Christ and how does he do it? Well, obviously it is his plan of salvation for all of creation but it is carried out through the work of His Church: the Church triumphant in heaven and the pilgrim Church at work upon earth. It is Jesus working in and through his Church that brings the kingdom of heaven upon earth – albeit in an incomplete form, ever-struggling with her own internal paradoxes. That's the meaning of the parable about the man who sows good seed in his field and yet his enemy has sown darnel along with it: it is the paradox of the life of the Church where she herself is holy and pure for she is founded – or sown - by her Lord and can point to the examples of her holiness in the lives of her saints; but at the same time suffers the ignominy of the counter examples of her great sinners too. The decision as to who shall be on the Lord's right hand and who on his left at the end of time is left up to him but in the meantime it is a haven and a training ground for saints and sinners alike. While the Church in her nature is perfect, we know only too well that we as her members are often far from perfect. She upholds the truth of the Lord and asks her members to abide by it, but at the same time welcomes sinners to offer reconciliation, peace and forgiveness. The final balancing act will be the Lord's but, in the meantime, we must press ahead towards the harvest time unperturbed in our own faith, as best we can, by our own sins and the sins of others.

That's why the Second Vatican Council explicitly referred to the Church as 'the kingdom of God already present in the world' (cf *Lumen Gentium*). The kingdom is not present in its fullness. That will only come at the harvest at the end of time; but it is none the less present despite the sinfulness of her members.

There is an obvious sense in which the Lord wishes to encourage us, though, in our respective Christian vocations. While we must acknowledge that the work of sowing (or planting mustard seeds/yeast) is

primarily the Lord's doing, our participation in his work through our own actions truly can be like the mustard seed which becomes the largest shrub of all or like the yeast that leavens the dough all the way through. Sometimes it is those very small acts of kindness or Christian charity that can make all the difference in particular situations and even in people's entire lives. Sometimes just an honest word of truth, charitably given, can make the difference between someone making a mess of their lives and them flowering as a person with joy in their heart.

More importantly, it is usually our own respective vocations lived out joyfully over a whole lifetime that can truly transform those around us and have such a positive effect for generations to come. The lives of the saints are obvious testimony to that. Perhaps in our own culture, the obvious Christian disposition that can make all the difference to many people's perception of life is a basic pro-life attitude: being in favour of life, respecting it as a gift from God; defending it from conception to natural death and living our own lives with an infectious joy that radiates outwards, even in sickness and in old age.

It is when we give in to the pessimism and cynicism of the world around us that the dandelion is sown amongst us. As the gospel parable says, it is when everybody was asleep that the enemy came in and sowed dandelion among the wheat and made off. And the 'making off' here refers more to the making off with souls than it does to the sneaky manner of someone's behaviour.

As we reflect upon the parables of the Lord about his kingdom, let us pray that we may be always vigilant and awake; not allowing ourselves to 'fall asleep' and allow the enemy to enter our own lives and sow dandelion in our own hearts so that we become indifferent to the Lord's call to truth and the demands it makes upon us.