

## Sixteenth Sunday of the Year July 23, 2017

Wisdom 12:13.16-19 Romans 8:26-27 Matthew 13:24-43

Humankind has a constant but strange fascination with the exercise of power. Our world history presents us with details of human persons craving for power. In this context today's liturgy makes a vital point. Power at its best is not external ostentation that makes people seek all control, but the interior reality that seeks to imitate the power of God and transforms the individual and the world. Power considered negatively leads a person to judge the other only to discover later how wrong we are in such an act. Instead of judging who is good and holy and who is not, we ourselves remain good and holy and leave the rest to God who sees every person in a benevolent way. Our understanding must radically change if we are to comprehend what God wants us to understand. We often run the danger of categorizing things as good and bad based on only the outward appearances. We have the response in the first reading where a wise teacher finds a reason to hope as he gives lessons on God's grace. Through the hard lessons of life God teaches his wisdom to human persons. God teaches people how to act in kindly fashion towards one another. In the second reading Paul describes Christians at prayer. The spirit prays within them and enables them to pray in accordance with the Father's will. The Spirit who indwells within us enables us to pray. He expresses our pleas for us, even when we do not know how to put them into words. In the Gospel Jesus teaches about the mystery of the Kingdom of heaven. He tells us how the kingdom grows and how it can be transformed from something tiny into a large entity. God the sower of good seed allows bad seed as well as good to grow till harvest time and then he will deal with good and bad on their merit.

The First Reading of today tells us about the love of God and the divine power which has mastery over everything and directed at gradually steering people toward the path of life. He cares about everyone, shining in righteousness and has patience towards all. Righteousness is His strength and he will not judge anyone unjustly. In His Divine righteousness, God provides all of us with the opportunity to be saved. When some are arrogant, doubting the power of God, He shows them His strength. Through such actions, He teaches His people that the righteous must be kind. He fills His children with good hope because He freely gives to all who repent of their sins. The all-knowing God knows every human weakness. In their weakness, people misuse the freedom granted them by God. They turn away from the creator and worship the things of creation, transforming them into hindrances of grace rather than helps. Though the gift of life was fashioned by God to be imperishable, people brought suffering and death into the world by turning away from the source of life and turning to sin. The author wants us to realize that God's power is realized through his mercy for all. Rather than condemning people out right, God seeks the ways to steer them to repentance. Hardships can lead to a change of heart and thus giving fresh hope to people.

Speaking to the Roman Community Paul says that we weak human beings do not know how to fulfill the most basic Christian duties, namely to pray as we ought. Prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned towards heaven; it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both

trial and joy. Most people confine their idea of prayer to petition. We ask God for something we need and often we do not know what the best thing we must ask is. For Paul, the fact that we do not know how to pray as we ought causes no concern, provided we let the spirit to come to our aid and do the needful. The spirit is within us, appealing to the Father on our behalf and enables us to call God Abba Father. Yet he tells us that as humans we do struggle against the flesh. The spirit indeed groans within us as we pray to our Father through Jesus. God the Father searches the hearts of Christians at prayer. He at will lead knows what the spirit desires because the Spirit asks everything according to the Father's will. Christians never pray alone. As long as they live as Christians, they pray as Christians. It is the Spirit who is within the Christians that will lead us all to the Father. The spirit who is present in our weakness prays in us. God the Father searches deep within us and hears the groaning of the spirit and the prayer of the spirit becomes ours.

In the gospel of today we have the Kingdom Parables of Jesus. Kingdom in the Gospel does not refer to a place, either here or hereafter. The Greek word *basileia* is better translated as 'kingship', or 'reign', or 'rule', so some translations speak of the 'Reign of God'. The Kingdom is primarily an environment, it is a set of relationships, and it is a situation where God's values prevail. The divine values in practice are nothing but the deepest human values and aspirations as mirrored in the life of Jesus, who is himself the revelation of God to us in accessible human form. These values include truth, love, compassion, justice, a sense of solidarity with all other human beings, a sense of trust in other, a deep respect for the dignity of every other human person, a holistic concept of human growth and development. People who, individually and collectively, try to live these values belong, with Jesus, to the Kingdom of God. They are united with the rule of God in trying to build a world we would all like to see happen. It is very much something for the here and now. It is basically the vocation of the Church, and therefore the vocation of every member of that community. The Kingdom however, extends beyond the Church. There are people, who may not explicitly know Christ or express allegiance to Christ, yet live the ideals and the values of the Kingdom in their lives.

The parables in this passage tend to emphasize the mysterious ways in which the kingdom grows. Especially highlighted is how something can begin very tiny and end up very big. Here we have three images or parables of the Kingdom at work among us. The first is the parable of the weeds among the wheat that explains about the judgment and who makes it. The wheat sown in the field is understood to be good and weed sown by the enemy is bad. The Householder's slaves judged the weed to be bad and wanted to cut them down which is logical. The owner surprisingly says no and mandates that they should be left to grow together. Judgment will be rendered at the end and then only by the owner and not the slaves. The point is that the judgment between the wheat and the weeds is not easy and hasty judgment can be disastrous. A second point is that final judgment can be made only by the owner. In the meantime we all have to learn to live together patiently and without judging one another. The parable stresses the final judgment when the son of man will deliver the final verdict which will condemn the children of the evil one namely the weeds and extol the children of the kingdom namely the wheat. The parable is saying that people who are filled with the vision and values of God and Jesus must learn to live side by side with a whole spectrum of

people who, in varying degrees, do not yet share or live this vision and these values. The parable truly tells us that each one of us is a combination of wheat and weeds.

The Kingdom of God clearly calls people to attain the highest ideals and greatest generosity. It also calls for a great measure of tolerance, patience and understanding in seeing the Kingdom become a reality. The conversion of our societies into Kingdom-like communities is a very gradual process. There is always the danger that, when people try to take God or the good life seriously, they become elitist. We Christians, simply as Christians, can feel ourselves to be superior to those of other religions. Today's parable far from being remote touches comprehensively the deep areas of our lives. The coming of the Kingdom then is not going to be a neat and tidy process. Our experience again and again confirms that, whenever we try to bring any change and reforms in any community, it is challenged. The parable reminds us that in each one of us there are elements of the Kingdom and elements that are deeply opposed to it.

The next two parables point to two other characteristics of the Kingdom. The parable of the mustard seed shows that the work of the Kingdom has tiny beginnings but ends with extraordinarily large results. There is no attempt to explain how this happens. There is nothing about it that would attract attention, wonder and admiration. It takes place in a quiet way. Such is the kingdom of heaven. Its growth is miraculous and mysterious and rooted in the things of our common experience. The challenge is always to see the extraordinary in the ordinary. The parable also reflects on the Church established by Christ and its spectacular growth. Wherever the vision of the Kingdom becomes truly rooted, it will experience certain and inevitable growth. This is because the vision of the Kingdom is not a narrow, religious one but an expression of the deepest aspirations of all human beings. At its beginnings the Church, as the instrument for the building of the Kingdom, must have felt it faced a daunting task. Its tiny communities were scattered all over Asia Minor, Greece and Italy. Waves of persecution and hostility followed each other in a determined effort to wipe them out. But they prevailed as Truth, Love and Justice must in the end always prevail. Even so, the "weeds" of opposition will always be present.

In the third parable, the Kingdom is compared to a small amount of yeast in a large batch of dough. Its presence cannot be easily detected for it is totally blended with and is part of its environment. In Palestine bread was baked at home. Three measures of dough meant the amount needed for baking bread sufficient for a large family. Leaven was a little piece of dough kept over from previous baking, which had fermented in the keeping. It may have started out small but it quickly expands into a monumental size. Perhaps Jesus had seen Mary doing this precious little job often enough and used it as an example of his kingdom. However, in Jewish language leaven was often connected with evil influence. That is why at the Passover meal no leaven was used and as a preparation for the feast every bit of leaven was taken out and burnt. Jesus may have deliberately used the example to shock people and draw their attention to indicate how silently and quietly the kingdom grows in spite of the evil that exists and points how a good Kingdom community should be. At the same time, it has an energy of its own which produces a remarkable influence of growth in the whole. The whole point of the parable

lies in one thing, namely, the transforming power of the leaven. Leaven changed the character of whole baking, making bread soft, porous and spongy, tasty and good to eat. The introduction of the leaven causes a transformation in the dough and similarly the coming of the kingdom causes transformation in life.

Summing up the three parables we see a specific development of God's Kingdom among us. The Kingdom of God is going to be, on the whole, a messy business in which the good and bad, the strong and the weak, the clean and the corrupt will rub shoulder to shoulder both inside the Church and its communities and outside it. To try to create islands of absolute integrity is not realistic and is even self-defeating. Secondly, no matter how small the beginnings, if we are faithful to the spirit and values of the Kingdom, we can be sure that apparently difficult obstacles, threats and even dangers can be overcome. Finally, a Kingdom-community, even though very small, can exert a real influence on the growth of the environment of which it is fully a part and be instrumental in spreading Kingdom values as the accepted values. At the same time Jesus points to the fact that the enemy plays an important role in the ruining of the kingdom of God. He doesn't tell us why God has enemies; He simply takes it as a fact. He is a realist, not a dreamy eyed idealist. To take a realistic view of life we simply must begin with the facts – evil exists and it comes from people who have chosen to defy God. It may not make any sense to us, but we must simply deal with it. People, of their own free will, choose to defy God and do things quite apart from Him. God respects the freedom of man. Jesus however stresses strongly on the transforming power of the Kingdom. It brings changes in all young and old, rich and poor, healthy and sick. It is able to work silently and resolutely to bring total transformation.

Today's liturgy makes a vital point that power at its best is not external ostentation but an interior reality, that which imitates the power of God and transforms the individual and the world. The parable tells us of the enemies acting powerfully. Here we have the example of sowing of darnier with the wheat. To sow darnier among wheat as an act of revenge was punishable by Roman law. But the realistic possibility to the farmer was, despite the temptation to retaliation, patience and tolerance until the harvest. God acts the same with good and bad people until he will make his own gathering. We need the same virtues as we look towards the church, God's kingdom as we look for the growth in the world. The other two parables visualize such growth from smallness to largeness. Let us today pray for the church that it may experience the fullness of growth through the presence of Jesus among us.

A man was out walking in the desert when a voice said to him, "Pick up some pebbles and put them in your pocket, and tomorrow you will be both happy and sad." The man obeyed. He stooped down and picked up a handful of pebbles and put them in his pocket. The next morning he reached into his pocket and found diamonds and rubies and emeralds. And he was both happy and sad. Happy he had taken some - sad that he hadn't taken more.

There is a story about a young man and an old preacher. The young man had lost his job and didn't know which way to turn. So he went to see the old preacher. Pacing about the preacher's study, the young man ranted about his problem. Finally he clenched his fist and shouted, "I've

begged God to say something to help me. Tell me, Preacher, why doesn't God answer?" The old preacher, who sat across the room, spoke something in reply - something so hushed it was indistinguishable. The young man stepped across the room. "What did you say?" he asked. The preacher repeated himself, but again in a tone as soft as a whisper. So the young man moved closer until he was leaning on the preacher's chair. "Sorry," he said. "I still didn't hear you." With their heads bent together, the old preacher spoke once more. "God sometimes whispers," he said, "so we will move closer to hear Him." This time the young man heard and he understood. We all want God's voice to thunder through the air with the answer to our problem. But God's is the still, small voice... the gentle whisper. Perhaps there's a reason. Nothing draws human focus quite like a whisper. God's whisper means I must stop my ranting and move close to Him, until my head is bent together with His. Then, as I listen, I will find my answer. Better still, I find myself closer to God.

Fr. Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India