

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Wisdom 12:13, 16-19
<i>Response</i>	Lord, you are good and forgiving.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 86:5-6, 9-10, 15-16
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 8:26-27
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Blessed are you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth; you have revealed to little ones the mysteries of the kingdom.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 13:24-43

The 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through Jesus' discourse on the parables of the kingdom. And this week we look at a cluster of some of Jesus' most famous parables about the kingdom of God, and there are several to look at this week. So as with the last readings, we are going to walk through it step-by-step and try to take it one parable at a time and interpret them, and then we will go back and briefly, just briefly, look at the Old Testament, how the old and the new link together here, because there is a lot that Jesus is saying here in his parables for the second part of his discourse. So the Gospel for this week is another long one, it is Matthew 13:24-43. So the Church is giving us a number of parables to read and ponder, so let's go through those together:

Another parable he put before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until

the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."¹

Let's pause there for just a second. Remember here that we are continuing our journey through the discourse on the parables, and one of the things that I said in the last session on the parables was just to remember that parables are not just comparisons, they are also riddles. So Jesus is using this ancient Jewish form of teaching, of the riddle, the *mashal*, the proverb, the parable, in order to tease our minds and to get us to think about the mysteries of the kingdom that he says he's unveiling through the parables. He is both revealing the kingdom, but he is also concealing the kingdom, in a sense, through these different parables. So lots of the parables, although they are drawing from ordinary life, they're not identical to ordinary life. They often contain some unexpected element — or what I like to call a twist — that usually gives you an insight into what the main message of the parable is. Usually the twist will help you find out. It is not every parable, but it's many of them. And in this case you can already see that there are certain aspects of this parable that are, so to speak, unrealistic or unexpected.

So on the one hand, a man sowing good seed in his field would be a standard part of every day first century Jewish life. It was an agricultural society. Wheat was the staple crop, from which you would make bread. But the first unexpected element of this parable is that while everyone's asleep, his enemy comes along in the middle of the night and sows little seeds of weeds into his garden in order to ruin his crops. So this is just downright vindictive, and it is also a little comical to imagine a guy creeping through his fields in the middle of the night and sowing weeds throughout his fields. I mean how long would it take and how would you even do that? So immediately you can see here that something unusual is taking place. Now if we keep walking through the parable here, once the stalks of wheat come up and begin to bear grain, the servants can notice now that weeds have appeared also.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Most scholars here will see in that verse a reference to what used to be known as the wheat and the tares. In other words, there is a certain type of grass, it's almost like a kind of ryegrass, and it's a weed that can look very much like wheat in the early stages of its growth, so that you might not be able to tell the two were different from one another until the stalks actually began to bear fruit, to bear heads of grain. Then you would be able to see, "wait a second! Some of this is weeds and some of this is wheat. Some of this is wheat and some of this is tares." So the servants here notice the weeds once the fruit comes to bear and — again, second unexpected element — they are a little shocked. They are like "didn't you sow good seed in your field?" So this is a surprise to them, "how then has it weeds?" Because you would normally associate weeds with a negligent farmer, with someone who's neglectful. Maybe you have had a garden before and you kind of let it go, you weren't attentive, you didn't stay on top of it, what happens? Pretty soon your garden is full of weeds. So they asked the master, "You are a good farmer. You sow good seeds. Why are there weeds in the field?" And he responds, "an enemy has done this." Another surprise there, he wouldn't say "well you know sometimes weeds just grow." He knows that this is the direct result of someone's plot against him.

And so the servants say to him, "well do you want us to go and gather them?" And here you have a bit of a twist because you might be expecting the master to say "well yeah, get the weeds out of the field," because again, think about normal gardening practices. If you have weeds in your garden, your first impulse is going to be to go and take them out so that whatever plants are planted there will continue to grow and bear fruit. But the master doesn't do that, he says here, "let them grow together because if you go and gather the weeds you might root up the wheat along with them. Let them stay together until the harvest and then at the harvest time I'm going to have the harvesters separate them out. Gather the weeds and burn them and gather the wheat into the barn." Okay, so what is all this about? Well obviously this is not just about first century agricultural practices. Jesus is trying to lead the disciples into one of the mysteries of the kingdom.

And one of the mysteries of the kingdom of God is that when you look at it, it's a mixed bag. It looks like a field that has been neglected because is not only has weed in it, it also has weeds in it. In other words, it's not pretty. You might expect, like one of the prophets say in the Old Testament, "the kingdom of God is like a

glorious field of wheat, a golden field of wheat.” But that is not what the kingdom looks like in the parable. In this parable the kingdom looks like a field that is a mixed bag. It has weeds and it has wheat, and Jesus’ point here, the meaning, the message of this particular passage, is that that shouldn't be a scandal to the disciples. In other words, there is going to be good and there is going to be evil. There's going to be wheat and there's going to be tares in the kingdom until the very end. That God, in his mysterious providence, allows the good and evil to stand, to grow, so to speak, side-by-side. But that doesn't mean he's negligent, it doesn't mean he is unaware of the evil, it doesn't mean that he is not going to do something about it. All of it will be sorted out, but only at the end, only at the final judgment. Now as soon as I am saying that I am realizing that I just gave you the explanation. We are supposed to wait because Jesus is going to give you the explanation a little bit later. But I hope that gives you a sense of what Jesus is doing here and how the parable might be somewhat unexpected.

Alright, let’s keep going. The next parable is probably the most famous parable of all — maybe after the sower — and that's the parable of the mustard seed. In verses 31-32 we read these words:

Another parable he put before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

Pause there for just a minute. So what is going on in this parable? Well this parable is a really surprising one right from the beginning. So the first twist is the very first line, “a man took a grain of mustard seed and sowed it in his field.” Now if you do a little study about mustard seeds and mustard trees, especially if you look at some of the commentaries that scholars have written on that today, what you will find out is that a mustard tree is basically a weed. It is not a desirable plant. Nobody makes a field full of mustard trees to harvest them. If you want a kind of visual equivalent, if you have ever seen a tumbleweed in the American West or in Texas, that is what a mustard tree looks like. It's ugly. It's invasive. If you get mustard seeds into your field or into your yard, they are going to grow and you are never going to be able to stamp them out. So the first surprise in this

particular parable is why would anybody ever sow a mustard seed in his field? And why would Jesus compare that to the kingdom of God? But it keeps going because he says that the mustard seed is the “smallest of seeds”, and that is true. Proverbially in Judaism in the first century A.D., if you wanted to say something was really small you would say it is like a mustard seed. It was kind of a proverbial image for something that's really, really tiny.

So he says it's the smallest of all seeds, but when it grows it's the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree. Well...yes and no. It does grow into a kind of a big shrub, but to call it a tree is a bit of a stretch. At its biggest, a mustard tree gets about 10 feet tall. So it is hardly the kind of thing that you would expect the birds of the air to come and make nests in their branches, or something like that. What is Jesus talking about here? Well if you look, he is actually drawing on an image from the Old Testament and kind of twisting it. If you go back, for example, to the prophecies of Ezekiel 17 or 31, or to Daniel 4, it was frequently the case that in the Old Testament, if you wanted to describe a glorious kingdom, you would compare it to a tree, because trees are very majestic. So you might say something like “this kingdom was like a cedar of Lebanon.” The cedars of Lebanon were these enormous trees. They were glorious, they were gorgeous. They would cut them down and they would make all kinds of products from the wood of the cedars of Lebanon. The Temple was built from the cedars of Lebanon, these great majestic trees. So Ezekiel is describing the coming of the kingdom of God in Ezekiel 17, and he said it is going to be like a “glorious cedar of Lebanon.” So Jesus here is talking about the kingdom, and his audience, if they knew the Old Testament, they might be expecting him to say that “the kingdom of heaven is like a cedar of Lebanon” or it is “like a a great oak tree.” But instead, what does he say? It is like a weed, it is like a like a mustard bush. And you can imagine them scratching their heads, like “what is this guy talking about? The kingdom of heaven is like a weed, it's like a mustard tree? This doesn't make any sense.” So he says “the birds of the air come and they make nests in its branches.” Well it might make a nest in a small tree like that, but usually you would think that the birds would make their nest in these more glorious, these more majestic trees, these giant trees, like an oak or a cedar or something like that.

Okay, so what's the message of this parable? Well the meaning is really clear if you focus on the twists. The point is this, the kingdom starts out small and it ends

great, but it doesn't look like what you are going to expect it to look like. It's kind of ugly. It's kind of like a field with weeds and wheat in it. It doesn't look like the kind of thing you think God would do when he brings his kingdom. So it starts small, but it ends great. It doesn't look like you expect it to. But also notice that the mustard tree, and the mustard seed as well, it's invasive. In other words, once it gets in, it keeps growing and it spreads and it grows and it spreads. And this would make you think of the Old Testament image in Daniel 2 of the kingdom of God. Because in Daniel 2, Daniel saw this vision of the kingdom that starts out as a little bitty stone, but then it grows into a great mountain that fills the whole earth. This is a very, very similar kind of riddle because mountains might turn into little stones over time as they break down over time, but little stones don't become mountains. So it's the same kind of imagery here, Jesus is using the language of the prophets to show the disciples that the kingdom is a mysterious reality. You have to go beyond the visible, which doesn't look like what you expect it to look like, say 12 guys from Galilee, a couple fishermen and tax collectors. On the outside it might not look like much, but if you let it get rooted, it's going to grow and it's going to spread and it's going to become a great tree so that the birds of the air will want to come and make their nest in its branches.

What does that refer to? Well if you go back again to the Old Testament, Ezekiel 17 and other books of the Old Testament, the images of birds and bees will frequently be used as a symbol for the Gentile nations. So if this kingdom is going to be something that the birds of the air come to make nests in, that's a symbol of the fact that one day not just Israel, the tree — the tree was used for Israel in the Old Testament in Isaiah, Ezekiel and other places — but also the Gentiles, the birds of the air, the beasts, they are going to come and make their home in its branches. So it is going to be a universal kingdom that consists of both Israel and the Gentiles. And sure enough that's what happens. The kingdom starts small, very small, with a rabbi and 12 guys from Galilee, and then it spreads and spreads and spreads throughout the whole earth. And now think about just the Catholic Church alone, how many people are there today? 1 billion Catholics, and that is just right now, that is not all the Christians throughout the entire history of the Church for the last 2000 years. So this this little seed that begins with Jesus and his disciples, and it is going to become this great tree that spreads throughout the earth.

Okay, so that is the parable of the mustard seed. What about the next parable? Again, this one is commonly referred to as the woman and the leaven, or just the parable of the leaven. It's a short one, but it's important. In verse 33 it says:

He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."

Alright, let's pause there. Once again, where's the twist in this parable? Where is the unexpected part of this parable? Well it is in the very first line, "the kingdom of heaven is like leaven." Alright, if you were a first century Jew and you knew the Old Testament, you would know that in the Old Testament, leaven — which is another word for yeast — is something that is considered unclean. It's frequently a symbol of being unclean. So when you want to celebrate the Passover meal, you had to eat bread without leaven, bread that had not had yeast mixed into it to make the dough rise. It was kind of a symbol of purification. You can even look at some of the other teachings of Jesus. For example, in Matthew 16 Jesus says "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees." So the leaven of the Pharisees is their teaching and their hypocrisy. So it is a symbol of uncleanness. In 1 Corinthians 5, St. Paul does the same thing. He says "cleanse out the old leaven and bring in righteousness and holiness." So he uses leaven as a symbol for sin. So that's a weird thing for Jesus to do, to take something that was known as being unclean and saying the kingdom of God is like that. Which by the way, just as a kind of scientific side note, it is interesting that the Jews regarded leaven as unclean, because as contemporary science has shown us, what yeast is, is it is a small microorganism. It is a small bacteria and what it does, the way it makes bread rise, is the the yeast, the microorganism, gets into the bread and it eats all the sugars, and when it eats the sugar it produces gas. The carbon dioxide that the little organisms emit, make bubbles and the bubbles cause the bread to rise. So you can see how even contemporary science would show that there is a certain natural logic to considering yeast to be unclean. Well in antiquity that was the kind of standard association with yeast, it was unclean. So when Jesus says that heaven is like leaven, people would be scratching their heads, "what is this guy talking about? The kingdom is like leaven!?"

The other element here that's interesting is that the woman takes the leaven, she hides it in three measures of meal, which is about 50 pounds — that is a lot of

meal. And even just a little leaven leavens the whole lump. So what's the meaning of this parable? Well again I think it is very similar to the mustard seed. The kingdom starts out really small, like a little bit of leaven, but it's powerful and it's transformative. Just a little bit of leaven is able to cause the three measures of meal to rise and to become this great loaf of bread. It is kind of like the mustard seed starts small and becomes a great bush. But it also shows that there's something mysterious about the way the kingdom grows, especially in ancient times too. They would not have had the science behind it. They wouldn't have known how and why, that if you take some of this yeast and you put it into bread dough that it's going to make it rise. It's mysterious. You take the dough and often you put it in the dark too in order to let it rise, and then you come back and sure enough it has risen. So there is a kind of mystery there, and I think that's what Jesus is getting at too. The kingdom is not what you expect. It's mysterious. It starts out small but it ends great. And of course, there may be a Eucharistic image there as well. Anytime you see bread, bread is going to play a key role in Jesus' mission and message when you get to the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist.

The next few verses here are important, because Jesus once again gives us an insight into the parables when he says this:

All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world."

Alright, pause there for just a second. This is very similar to what we saw last week with the beginning of the discourse. The parables are about revealing hidden mysteries. Jesus is leading the disciples into the mysteries of the kingdom, to the supernatural nature of the kingdom, to the invisible character of the kingdom. It is like yeast that grows and spreads in the dark. You can't see it and you don't understand why and how it does it, and yet it does. By the way, from that he's quoting Psalm 78:2. So he's drawing on one of the passages from the Psalm to show that he's speaking in these *mashalim*, these parables, these riddles, in order to unveil these mysteries that have been hidden since the foundation of the world.

Now does that mean that the Apostles get it? Not quite. They need a little help with at least one of the parables here, and so it says in verse 36:

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "He who sows the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Alright, so you can see very clearly here in this explanation that Jesus really isn't talking about agriculture, he's talking about salvation, he is talking about the kingdom of God, and in particular, he's talking about the mystery of sin and righteousness, and of the final judgment. So the sower here is identified, number one, as a son of man. The field is the world, so it is this world that we live in. The good seed are the sons of the kingdom, who are going to shine like the sun after the final judgment. And the weeds are "the sons of the evil one." That is a pretty strong term there because what he's describing there are people who are wicked because they're in a kind of filial relationship with Satan. That's really strong language. There are two families here. You are either sons of the kingdom or you are sons of the enemy, sons of the evil one. The sower here, the enemy, the evil sower, is the devil himself. And what's going to happen is throughout time, from now until the end, he's going to continue to sow sin and evil within the world. The world is going to be a place of both good and bad, and it is only, once again, at the final judgment, at the end of time, at the end of the age, that the righteous and the wicked will be separated completely. The righteous will go into the kingdom of heaven, which is described here as the barn, whereas the wicked will go into the fiery furnace of separation from God, that eternal separation from God that we would call Hell. Which by the way, as side note, as a kind of cultural note — if you have ever wondered — the language of the Grim Reaper, that is a kind of cultural borrowing from this parable, because the angels are the reaper who bring

the judgment of God to the world at the end of the age. So that's where that language and imagery comes from.

For our purposes here though, the main point is this, Jesus is revealing to us that the parable of the weeds and the wheat is really about the mystery of sin. It's about the mystery of iniquity and about the fact that this world, before the final judgment, is always going to consist of both righteous and wicked, good and evil; and in his providence God allows those to remain side by side until the end. The Catechism says as much about this when it talks about the mystery of the Church. In paragraph 827, drawing on *Lumen Gentium* from Vatican II, it says that the Church is “at once holy and always in need of purification...In everyone, the weeds of sin will still be mixed with the good wheat of the Gospel until the end of time.” So this parable is not just about the state of the world, it is also about the state of our soul. That in this valley tears, before our final judgment, before our particular judgment, there's always a battle between good and evil, the struggle to live a life of righteousness, and the weeds of sin that can grow in our own hearts. So we must recognize that not only is the Church a mixed bag — a *corpus mixtum* is what some of the Church Fathers would say, a mixed body of saints and sinners — but I am a mixed bag too. I always have to be conscientious about trying to uproot the weeds of sin in my heart and to allow the wheat to flourish, the wheat of righteousness, so that I might be a son of the kingdom as well.

So in order to do that we have to rely on a God who is just and a God who is also merciful and forgiving. So the first reading for today is from Wisdom 12. It really is just a kind of a hymn to the mercy and the justice of God:

For neither is there any god besides thee, whose care is for all men,
to whom thou shouldst prove that thou hast not judged unjustly;
For thy strength is the source of righteousness,
and thy sovereignty over all causes thee to spare all.
For thou dost show thy strength when men doubt
the completeness of thy power,
and dost rebuke any insolence among those who know it.
Thou who art sovereign in strength dost judge with mildness,
and with great forbearance thou dost govern us;
for thou hast power to act whenever thou dost choose.

Through such works thou has taught thy people
that the righteous man must be kind,
and thou hast filled thy sons with good hope,
because thou givest repentance for sins.

And the Psalm in this case, the Responsorial Psalm, is Psalm 86. It is the same refrain:

Lord, you are good and forgiving.

So what is the Church calling us to remember here? I think it's the same message that you find in the second letter of Peter, where some people are scoffing and they are saying "if Christ is ever going to come back, why hasn't he returned yet? We are sitting here waiting around so long since his passion, death, and resurrection, when is he going to come back?" Peter says that "God is not slow about his promises, but he's forbearing, he's patient, so that you might come to repentance." So the reason God allows us to subsist in this in-between state between the resurrection of Christ and the final judgment is because he wants as many people to come to repentance as possible, because he's merciful, because he's kind, because he's forbearing, and also because he is just. So there will be a final judgment, but in the meantime he wants to give us time to repent and to accept the good news of this mysterious kingdom of God.

So in closing then, I just would say that the parables we looked at today, especially the weeds and the wheat, are helpful for us to remember that when we encounter sin in the world, and when we encounter scandal, in particular, and sin in the Church — because remember, the angels go and they gather the weeds out of the kingdom in this world, that's a symbol for the Church on earth, present in mystery — that we shouldn't be surprised. Jesus obviously anticipated that. He expected there to be good and bad, sinners and saints, mixed altogether until the end. So if he is not surprised by that, we shouldn't be surprised by that. So we shouldn't allow the experience of discovering, or even being hurt by scandal in the Church, to be a reason to drive us out of the Church. The Church still teaches the truth. The Church is still the messenger and the bringer of the truth of salvation, and as I like to tell my students all the time, "you don't leave Peter because of Judas." There are sinners right there in the first Twelve Apostles, but just because one of

them was a traitor, like Judas, doesn't mean that you would not be a disciple of Jesus. You don't leave Peter and the Twelve for the sake of Judas. And the same thing is true here, that Jesus is showing us that in this world there's going to be sin, there is going to be scandal, there's going to be weeds in the field, but we still want to strive through God's grace to be one of the sons of the kingdom.