Lectio Divina – 16th Sunday of the Year A – 23 July 2023

Matthew’s Gospel (in brief)

* Composed between 80-90 CE
* Author is anonymous, but named as ‘Matthew the tax collector’ by later tradition.
* Written in scholarly ‘synagogue’ Greek.
* Incorporates almost the entire Gospel of Mark, plus material from Q and material unique to Matthew.
* Structured around 5 major discourses (each ends with the phrase: “When Jesus had finished….”:
  1. Prologue – chapters 1- 4 Genealogy, Nativity & Infancy
  2. 1st: 5-7 Sermon on the Mount
  3. 2nd: 10 Missionary Discourse
  4. **3rd: 13 Parable Discourse**
  5. 4th: 18 Community Discourse
  6. 5th: 23-25 Apocalyptic Judgement Discourses
* May be a parallel for the 5 books of the Pentateuch - Jesus the new Moses.
* Jesus first words are ‘to fulfil all righteousness’.
* A handbook for Church leaders to assist them in teaching and preaching, worship, mission and polemic.
* 2 broad categories: discourse & narrative.
* The only Gospel to explicitly mention the ‘Church’ – Matthew is theologian of the church.
* Initially addressed to a Jewish-Christian audience – only late in the Gospel is there openness to Gentiles.
* Names Jesus as ‘Messiah’ at the very beginning and throughout the Gospel.

Matthew 13:24-43 - things to notice

* This Sunday’s Gospel begins the middle section of Matthew’s Gospel. The focus of these Sundays is: unfolding the mystery of God’s Kingdom:
  1. Revelation of the Kingdom to the simple
  2. Parable about the Sower [questions about Jesus’ use of parables/explanation of the parable]
  3. **Parable about the Sower of good seed, [parables of the mustard seed & the yeast; good seed parable explained]**
  4. Parables about the Treasure in the Field, the Fine Pearl, the Fishing (Drag) Net
* Given that Matthew’s Gospel was intended as a kind of handbook for leaders of early Christian communities, it is probable that the parables presented in the Gospel serve to give leaders both a text and a method for their teaching and preaching. Note the insistence in this week’s Gospel that Jesus never taught the crowd except in parables.
* The parable in this week’s Gospel follows immediately from last week’s Gospel reading.
* Note the use of: ‘The Kingdom of heaven’ which was not present in last week’s parable, but will be the beginning for each of the remaining 5 parables.
* Note: ‘may be compared to’ and ‘is like’ – that is, the Kingdom of heaven is not confined to the image. The image serves as a way into the parable.
* Note, for example, that the primary image in this first parable is that of a field, not that of the ‘good seed’.
* Note that the ‘man’ is later revealed in the parable as a householder with servants. Note that the householder does not spend any time investigating who has sown the darnel in his field. He appears quite uninterested in holding an investigation. The householder simply says: some enemy has done this.
* Note that the good seed and the darnel grow together. No one immediately recognises that the darnel is not wheat. Darnel usually grows in the same production zones as wheat and was a serious weed of cultivation until modern sorting machinery enabled darnel seeds to be separated efficiently from wheat seed. The similarity between these two plants is so great that in some regions, that darnel is referred to as "false wheat". It bears a close resemblance to wheat *until the ear appears*. Only then can you really tell the difference between the two plants. Before that, there are some signs to do with the direction in which the spikelets grow. Perhaps that is what the servants see. The wheat will also appear brown when ripe, whereas the darnel is black. [Wikipedia]
* ‘let them both grow until harvest time’ for fear that the wheat may be damaged in an attempt to remove the darnel. The householder is a patient man, waiting until it is certain which plant is which; the servants seem eager to get on with the job of weeding.
* at harvest time, when you can certainly tell the difference (brown for wheat, black for darnel), the sorting will be done.
* First the darnel is gathered to be burnt and the wheat gathered into the barn.
* Notes about the explanation: Vs36-43

1. the parable has an eschatological focus – looks forward to the final judgement, but also deals with the present (now) situation
2. the sower is the Son of Man (Jesus)
3. the field is the world, the place of human activity, humanity itself
4. the good seed: the subjects of the kingdom – believers, those who have given their lives over to the kingdom/reign/presence of God
5. the darnel: subjects of the ‘evil one’ – in contrast to the subjects of the Kingdom.
6. the enemy is the devil – evil personified
7. the reapers/gatherers are the angels – the ‘servants’ in the parable
8. gather out of his kingdom.. – the kingdom of God has been given to the Son who will bring it to the earth in fullness at the end of time
9. the blazing furnace – a biblical apocalyptic expression used in Matthew here to demonstrate the seriousness consequence (not punishment) of not belonging to the Kingdom
10. Weeping and grinding (gnashing) of teeth – wonderful, descriptive image used to great effect by Matthew and which occurs 5 times in his Gospel.
11. Then the virtuous – better translation is probably ‘the just’ – those at right with God and neighbour). Note it is not the *wise* or the *learned and clever* but the justwho will shine like the sun in God’s kingdom.
12. According to this explanation, the kingdom is a mixed body of saints and sinners until the final sifting takes place. Therefore, patience, tolerance and forbearance are necessary (see the First Reading). One must leave the shifting to God.
13. It would be possible to apply the parable along the lines that both wheat and darnel can be found in most human hearts. You could ask the question: can the darnel turn into wheat given God’s patience and mercy? But remember, you can’t force a parable into every situation and there are limits to which you can take a parable. See O’Brien’s comments below: each parable is designed to *stimulate people to think, ask questions and make decisions*.

The Liturgical Context

The Sunday Gospels Sundays 14-17: The Mystery of God’s Kingdom

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|  |  | First Reading | Second Reading | Gospel |
| 14th Sunday | Revelation to the Simple | Zechariah 9:9-10 | Romans 8:9, 11-13 | Matthew 11:25-30 |
| 15th Sunday | Parable Sermon 1 | Isaiah 55:10-11 | Romans 8:18-23 | Matthew 13:1-23 |
| **16th Sunday** | **Parable Sermon 2** | **Wisdom 12:13, 16-19** | **Romans 8:26-27** | **Matthew 13:24-43** |
| 17th Sunday | Parable Sermon 3 | 1 Kings 3:5, 7-12 | Romans 8:28-30 | Matthew 13:44-52 |

Liturgical Setting for this Sunday

The first reading is from the Old Testament Book of Wisdom. The historical context of the reading is ignored in order to use it as a preparation for today’s Gospel. Even though the words are a bit obscure, the reading praises God for being patient, just and lenient. In the presence of sin, God grants repentance. God, by his actions, teaches us to hope (trust in) his mercy. By his own actions God teaches us how to act towards each other – with justice and mercy.

Reflection

This Sunday's reading from Matthew contains parables two, three and four of the series of seven that begins with the parable of the sower (see previous Sunday). What binds these three parables together is the theme of the kingdom of heaven (this is widely thought to be Matthew's pious way of referring to the presence of God). Whenever I read this series of three parables I cannot help imagining a scene in which Jesus tells a story- which is what a parable basically is ... One could imagine that as Jesus the master preacher tells his parable questions arise among his listeners which lead to the second parable, which raises a further question or questions which in turn lead to the third parable - and three is a favourite number in biblical story telling.

One gains the impression that each parable is designed to *stimulate people to think, ask questions and make decisions*. It is significant that a number of parables end with Jesus saying ‘listen, anyone who has ears to hear’: in our jargon, ’think about it folks’. In keeping with the Bible as an *invitation to think rather than the imposition of thought*, parables are meant to encourage people to reflect and make decisions about their lives.

The first parable about the wheat and the darnel addresses the troubling question why evil seems to permeate and threaten the lives of good, faithful people who believe in a God of justice who is by definition intolerant of evil. If one's theology did not present God as intolerant of evil then who would be interested in following such a God? According to this parable, God (the sower) is portrayed as well aware of the conflict between good and evil and knows the best way of dealing with it. The wheat will be protected so that it can flourish; the darnel will not be allowed to overcome and destroy it. Thus, the situation is not out of (God's) control and good will ultimately triumph over evil at the harvest.

But parables, even those of Jesus, are limited human stories and cannot cover everything. The parable of the wheat and darnel could give the impression that good and evil are sort of evenly matched, at least until the harvest. How can you be sure you are on the winning side (the kingdom)? The second parable of the mustard seed, in my view, responds to this question or limitation in the preceding parable. It assures its listeners that the kingdom of heaven is the reality that grows vigorously and vibrantly; even though it may begin like a mustard seed in a tiny way it far outstrips any rival and becomes a tree that offers protection for all those who seek it (the birds).

Although the second parable answers a question that is likely to arise from the first one, it in turn raises another question: Jesus, you say that the kingdom of heaven grows from tiny beginnings like a mustard seed to become a highly visible and welcoming ‘tree’, but I don't see it growing in any visible way in my life. How do I know the kingdom is here? In answer, Jesus tells the parable of the woman mixing yeast in flour. Once mixed in with the flour, the yeast effectively disappears. All one sees is flour. But the yeast works its way invisible to the human eye and transforms the dough into something new and highly desirable. Even though the presence of God may appear at times invisible to human perception, it permeates all creation and is bringing about its transformation.

Parables are an ingenious way of preaching the word of God and Jesus was a master storyteller. But words are not the only way human beings communicate; indeed at times words, even the words that Jesus spoke, are not the appropriate way to respond to a situation - something that he of course knew very well. Paul assures his readers that when words fail us or are not the appropriate way to 'speak' to God, the Spirit enables us to express ourselves and our needs in the most appropriate way, a way that is ‘according to the mind of God’. God listens as attentively to those who are lost for words as to those who are gifted with words. No one is left unheard. Well aware of this, the author of the book of Wisdom celebrates our God who 'cares for everything' in a way that is perfectly just and merciful.

*from: The ABC of Sunday Matters by Mark O’Brien OP pp A115-A11. (Emphasis mine)*