

"The Wheat and the Tares"

Matthew 13: 24-30, 34-43

Proper 11 A, Boise, 2020 [after Epiphany V, Redding, 2011]

Here we have the second parable in the third lengthy discourse of Our Lord in the First Gospel, and another in which He uses agrarian analogies that He Himself explains. "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field" In the parable we studied last Sunday, a farmer spread seed on various kinds of ground, and some of it took root and grew, and some of it did not. He then told His disciples that the seed in the parable represented "the word of God." Well, in this parable that we consider today, the focus is on the plants that arise from "the good seed." After the preachers have done their job -- after they have sown the word of God in the hearts of all who will receive it, and the Holy Spirit has watered it -- we get a field of wheat. We get the Kingdom. And by the way, the oft-repeated phrase in St Matthew's Gospel, "the kingdom of heaven," doesn't mean a kingdom somewhere far from earth, one you can visit only after you die. "Kingdom of Heaven" in Matthew is the exact parallel of "Kingdom of God" in the other three Gospels. Matthew, the scholars tells us, was writing mainly for a Jewish audience -- and some Jews then, like some devout Jews today, do not use the word "God" in any language unless they are reading the Bible or calling on Him in prayer. So Matthew is merely trying to avoid giving offense when he substitutes the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" for "Kingdom of God."

Now that is a rather important point, because what Jesus meant by

the "Kingdom," when He used the term during the three years of His earthly ministry, and what we preachers in the Anglican Church mean when we use it today is simply the Church -- the Church as in "the Holy Catholic Church," the Church that is now spread throughout the world and has endured for nearly 20 centuries, and is found in its triumphal state in Heaven. After two millennia of preachers' planting the Gospel seed in the hearts of all who will receive it, and of the Holy Spirit's watering and protecting it -- watering it through the Sacraments and other means, protecting it through the disciplines we have in the Church -- the wheat of the Kingdom is spread across the entire earth, and the maturest of the plants are now in Heaven. When speaking of the Church, we divide it into two sections -- the Church Militant on earth, consisting of those of us who are still fighting the good fight against the Devil, the world, and the flesh; and the Church Triumphant, consisting of those who have done with their spiritual battles and are now enjoying the rest of victory in Heaven. Some teachers add a third section betwixt the other two, the Church Expectant -- but we'll save that one for another time. The point we need to grasp in order to interpret this parable we have today, in which Jesus the King explains the Kingdom, the portion of humanity currently under God's Reign, is that He is talking about the Church. In the centuries to come, the sowers of "the good seed" will plant it far and wide, first in Israel and then among the nations; it will take root on mountains and plains and in valleys, on all the islands of the seas, and it will extend to Heaven itself when plants mature and are moved to a better place.

There are some groups of Christians today who object to that interpretation of the parable. "What do you mean that the Church is the Kingdom?," they ask. "The Kingdom is only in Heaven, and we won't see it until we die or are raptured. We don't see the Kingdom here on earth until the King returns and brings it with him. Don't you know that the Church as we find it now is corrupt?"

Well, yes -- and that's the next point we come to in today's parable.

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat

The sin and corruption among God's people are part of the King's illustration of the Kingdom. The Church is a mixed multitude. Some of its members are true believers, and some are counterfeits. Even among the clergy, you have some who, when they have had a chance to grow a bit, have, like Judas, revealed themselves to be weeds, not wheat sprouting from Gospel seed. In the Church, there is corruption. In the Church, there is greed, and lust, and sexual abuse. In the Church, there is hypocrisy, vainglory, and nearly every evil that you find in the world. But it is still the Kingdom. Whatever faith and good works you find among Christians today are what have grown from the seed that Christ and His Apostles first planted. If you meditate on the images in the parable, you will see that, as the Kingdom grows over time, so does the evil in its midst. Remember, it is only after the seeds have sprouted that we discover that some of the plants are weeds. We turn

around and we are surprised to see that some of the people who call themselves Christians and whom we thought we knew are actually practicing a different religion, the Devil's religion. We have gone to church with them, and recited prayers and sung hymns beside them, but their actions during the rest of the week give the lie to their profession. They in fact worship a different god, the god we call "self." Our Lord in this parable tells us to expect that in the Church. The Church is full of weeds, and they are getting bigger and stronger by the day, right alongside the wheat. Nonetheless, it is the Kingdom.

And so how do we deal with that situation of the Church's being a mixed multitude? What practical advice is Our Lord here giving to His disciples? When the servants saw the weeds, they asked,

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.

There will come a day when the Church will be pure. The Lord Himself will purify it. After the Last Judgment, when the tares are gathered and burned, a believer will be able to look about him or her, and see only the Kingdom, the golden grains piled to the rafters of the Lord's barn, and not a weed among them. But until then, while the weeds the enemy has planted still sprout, the field is still the Kingdom. The Church is God's Church, and rather than tear it up to root out the unrepentant evil-doers, we had better spend our time seeing that the members who are genuine (not perfect, mind you, just genuine) receive all the water and

nourishment they need to grow to maturity.

Now, that does not mean that in the Church we should exercise no discipline. A parable typically has one or two points in its teaching about the Kingdom. A single parable does not give us enough matter on which to construct our entire doctrine. We clergy especially must strive for purity in our teaching and, with God's help, endeavor to frame our lives accordingly. But the parable does tell us that no attempt to reform the Church will get rid of all the evil. That task only the Lord can perform, and He will perform it when He returns.

The other message that we get from this parable is that we are to love the Church with all its present flaws.

I love thy kingdom, Lord,
The house of thine abode;
The Church our blest Redeemer saved
With his own precious blood.

Those verses well summarize the Anglican teaching on the Church. But, in fact, they were written by a Calvinist Congregationalist, Timothy Dwight, the President of Yale College during the early years of our republic. He was also the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, and like his grandfather led a great revival. The new revival, in the 1790's, began with the Rev'd Dr Timothy Dwight's preaching a series of sermons to the student body. In the early days of the jurisdiction I left to come here, then called The Diocese of Christ the King, it had a priest who held services for some students in the magnificent Timothy Dwight Chapel on

the Yale campus.

For many centuries it was the standard teaching among all the major branches of Christianity that the Church is the Kingdom of God — the Church Triumphant in its completeness, and the Church Militant as the Kingdom in the making. So attend to the words of that old Puritan, Dr Dwight, without reservation.

I love thy kingdom, Lord,
The house of thine abode,
The Church our blest redeemer saved
With his own precious blood.

Sure as thy truth shall last,
To Sion shall be giv'n
The brightest glories earth can yield
And brighter bliss of heav'n.

Let us affirm that truth again two centuries after he penned those words. We, the baptized in the Lord, are Jerusalem. We are that Zion to whom earth's brightest glories "shall be giv'n."

+