

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Wisdom 12:13.16-19 / Matthew 13:24-43)
19.07.2020
Surprised by Grace

It is quite amazing to notice that, more than 2000 years later, we are not very different from the owner's servants of our Gospel reading. Like them we are surprised by the existence of evil, its presence within us and among us.

Maybe this explains why evil has such a grip on us, it often takes us by surprise! It is as if we were living in a clean and perfect world, where everything is in order and moves on smoothly and each time there is something wrong, when a stain appears on the nice picture of the world, we are taken aback. This leads us to panic, despair, run away or even try to deny that anything wrong happened.

The demanding step in our growth in human and spiritual maturity is to consent to reality. The starting point for all of us is to acknowledge that we live in a messy world, marred by our limitations and our sins, a world made complex by infinite webs of ethical and emotional challenges.

The owner of the field does not really answer the servants' question: "Where does the darnel come from?" What he does is to help them to face reality as it is and from there he helps them to deal with it in a proper way.

It seems to me that often we are overwhelmed by a crisis or unable to cope with it because we are not in touch with reality: we want to believe that our family, our Church, our lives, are perfect and so when there is a problem we are surprised and unprepared for the challenge.

What Jesus tells us today is that we should begin with the humble truth that our families, Churches and relationships, all our institutions are marked by poverty and limitations, they are messy and sometimes dirty. Whether we like it or not, there were, there are and there will always be weeds among the wheat.

That does not mean that we must resign ourselves to the evil which is within us and around us. On the contrary, to acknowledge the existence of evil truthfully is a way to prepare ourselves for the good fight we are supposed to fight. We have something to learn from the first step in the AA program which is about accepting that there is something wrong in our present situation. The first step is about awareness and consenting to the reality of our lives as they are.

In fact, instead of being surprised by the presence of evil in our hearts and in the world, we should be surprised by grace, surprised that life is stronger than death, always amazed that love prevails over hate. We should be surprised by the small, discreet and real miracles that redeem our daily lives.

These days, this message is particularly relevant because many are inclined to follow prophets of doom. There are Christians who claim that we are in a Dark Age period and that the Christian civilisation has to be saved by creating ghetto communities.

Yes we know that evil is at work in and around us and we have to acknowledge this. Yet at the same time, we must not be blind to the God of surprises who promised: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20). Some could argue that we are going through a particularly difficult time. Maybe, however in 1841, St John Henry Newman preached: "Let us feel certain, as well we may, that however great are the disorders of this present age, (...)

to the humble and the lowly, the earnest-minded and pure in heart, the Lord God of Elijah still reveals himself. The presence of Christ is still among us” (*S.D.* 24).

Among the prophets of doom, some believe that we, Christians, have “to be separate, sometimes metaphorically, sometimes literally” (Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, p. 18) from the world, that we have to live apart from it (*Id.* p. 51).

This contradicts squarely Jesus’ teaching heard today. Not only the wheat cohabits with the darnel but the mustard seed of the Gospel is sown in the field of the world, the yeast of love is mixed with the dough of humanity.

Jesus was born in a dirty place at a messy time, and so are we sown in the field of our real, concrete and wounded world. Like the owner’s servants we would like our world to be clean, like a sanitised fish-tank where we would only meet supposedly good people. We would like everything to be black and white. Christianity would look like a chic English club where everybody is polite, well-educated and keeping up appearances.

Inspired by Jesus’ parables, Pope Francis continually asks us to go “to the ‘outskirts’ where there is suffering, bloodshed, blindness that longs for sight, and prisoners in thrall to many evil masters” (Homily, 28.03.2013).

What we are expected to do is to take the risk of a deep commitment to challenge and to dialogue with the world rather than reject it; we must strive to find the balance between a critical and a loving engagement with all our brothers and sisters in humanity.

A critical and loving engagement means that we must acknowledge what is wrong, what prevents us from being free and really alive, what threatens creation. At the same time, the eyes of our hearts must remain open to God’s action in the world he loves so much. If we do not want to despair and lose hope and strength, we need to keep alive within us a deep sense of amazement and thankfulness for all that the Lord accomplishes in us and around us.

Pope Francis invites us to “be surprised once again by God’s choice to be on our side, to show solidarity with us sinners” (Angelus, 19.01.2020). In Jesus Christ he shows the way of life not from afar but by becoming one of us, being with us always.

In our turn, let us show solidarity with all. Let us immerse ourselves in the world with God’s compassion and love so that his Kingdom may come.