



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A

False wheat

Readings: Wisdom 12: 13, 16-19, Ps 85, Romans 8: 26-27, Matthew 13: 24-43

‘Tommy’ was one of the most remarkable characters of my old parish.

Regular at Mass, an unseen benefactor of much parish life, an encourager of the young, he had been, in his professional life, President of the Royal Institute of Mechanical Engineers and a highly productive inventor, not least during the Second World War.

As part of my old parish was military this led to some interesting conversations about weaponry. I was present one night when a group of senior officers were discussing , with Tommy, the ultimate aim of a system so sophisticated that it could deliver the explosive through the letterbox of the tyrant or the terrorist without causing, what we now call, ‘collateral damage’ – that is to say, innocent deaths. It was something that had long occupied Tommy’s mind. He had lived through the deliberate and indiscriminate terror of the Blitz, the fear inducing howls of the V series rockets. He had observed the terrible retaliations of the fire-bombing of Dresden and the ultimate mind-changing sanction of Nagasaki. Even with modern ‘postcode’ armaments this week we are still computing the collateral damage of retaking Mosul between the retributive slaughter of the self-styled Caliphate and the repeated bombing of the city by the Allied Airforce. A weapon that

could discriminate would seem, therefore, to be the Shangri-La of warfare - if that is not an oxymoron.

The truth is that, in reality, no such system can be found that would

- a) either make the moral discrimination on the ground or
- b) achieve the purpose of the military command.

War depends for its success on terror. Culpability is impossible to assess by computer algorithm and the television age makes us all bystanders to that terrifying reality.

If this all seems a long way from today's Gospel, the same principle obtains. Jesus explains the parable of the wheat and the darnel in some detail. The darnel is the deliberately destructive night-time sowing of the enemy, Satan, to pollute the good crop.

Why, we ask, not weed out the darnel now? The simple answer is two-fold. First to prick out and replant the good crop while dumping the weeds on an agricultural scale is impossible and too much damage would be done to the intended crop.

Second – and you have to see this one day for yourselves – darnel and wheat are virtually indistinguishable from one another until the final fruiting stage. *Lolium Temulentum*, Darnel, poison darnel, is often known as 'false wheat' because it is a dead ringer – literally. It looks like the real thing but instead of feeding you the effects of eating its fruit can be a drunken nausea ending in death. It is left to the harvest itself to discriminate and then it is easy because the false wheat produces, not a rich brown fruit but a warning black.

So Jesus alludes to this well-known agricultural problem as a touchstone of both practice and judgement. You cannot tell until the fruit is in the ear. The enemy is careful to sow his falsehoods amongst the real thing and to disguise his deceits as virtues until the last possible moment. How often, in my lifetime, has the call for the apparent virtue of toleration of the sinner been transformed into first the acceptance and rapidly thereafter the glorification of the sin.

The collateral damage of reckless and ignorant weeding would destroy the crop. You would take out the good with the poisonous. The judgement will come at the harvest and it will be total. The servants of the Kingdom will be saved, Jesus promises, gathered in by the angels. Like the golden wheat, the Gospel tells us, 'they will shine like the sun'.

The servants of the Devil will enjoy a different blaze.

They will be consumed by fire.

This tells us several things.

Jesus prosecutes a real Devil as the source of corruption. That reality needs to be part of our discernment and the military intelligence of our spiritual warfare. There is a multifarious ministry of angels – which we remember at every Mass and forget at our peril and to our considerable weakening in our daily ministry.

There will be a final judgement and it will be radical. None of this sits comfortably with the thin watery gruel of much modern popular theology and is at complete odds with the universalist claptrap served up at the crematorium. ('Everyone will be saved by the God they don't believe in').

The Christ-proclaimed truth of the Judgement adds a tremendous urgency to our evangelism.

The parable nonetheless has its deliberate limitations. It is to make a specific point. At the end of the season Darnel will always be Darnel and fit only for the fire. It will not feed anyone. The 'false wheat' of Satan always poisons Man.

In the mercy of God we humans have the opportunity and capacity to change. It is why the Gospel always begins with the call to repent and turn back to God. This is the task of the Church in the society in which she ministers. If she/we fail in this we have abandoned our primary duty.

The judgement of God is always personal and utterly fair.

It is Satan who rejoices at collateral damage for the victims of collateral damage are almost always the innocent.

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