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16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Date: Sunday, July 23, 2017 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** A
First Reading: Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, 16–19
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 86:5–6, 9–10, 15–16 | **Response:** Psalm 86:5a
Second Reading: Romans 8:26–27
Gospel Acclamation: Matthew 11:25
Gospel Reading: Matthew 13:24–43
Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein **in the** Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa**.**

This past week I found myself asking God why things happen the way they do? If God is all powerful, could he not prevent tragedy or evil? Inherent in this question, is a deeper underlying question as to how exactly does God act in the world in the first place? God rarely acts with lightning bolts or intervenes in every decision of our life. It might be nice to think that God could eradicate genocide, slavery, climate-change, inconsiderate taxi drivers and other serious evils from our world and our roads, but if God did that, what would happen to our free will? No, God acts through us – we are his hands and feet, as the hymn says. But we are created in God's image and possess the greatest gift of all – free will. Christian Philosophers and others have long argued the points of how God acts and how we reject or respond to God, and the general conclusion to these arguments that I've come across is that the benefits of having a free will demonstrate a Good God, whereas were we to remove free will, we would be rendered unfree, and that would demonstrate a lesser God – but our God is all-powerful. Free will – to do good or to do evil – is the greatest gift God gave us as creatures, and he created us precisely to be able to choose between good and evil, and blest us with consciences so that we might take responsibility for our lives – that we might live in freedom. Because God's desire for all of us is to live freely, in joy and certain knowledge of God's love for us, and so freely offer our love back to God, if we are forced to love God, then it is not love at all, since love can only be freely given. God created us so that we might love God, but that meant that God had to allow for the possibility that we might choose not to love him.

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After reflecting on these readings and thinking about this question, I want to share with you that if we want God to act, we must have patience and faith: patience that He will act, and faith that He has acted. Because God's actions are most easily discerned in God's Kingdom, which is what all of God's actions intend to bring about, we can understand God's actions if we understand what his Kingdom is like.

Today we hear about three parables: the parable of the wheat and the so-called-weeds; the parable of the mustard seed; and the parable of the leaven, and they all purport to explain that God's Kingdom is like.

All three parables work with the images that Jesus' hearers were familiar with: wheat and weeds, good and bad, the righteous and sinners. Despite these very stark images, they all share a common theme.

These parables are all about waiting; and I'm sure I'm not alone when I say waiting can be difficult. In these three parables: The farmer waits for the harvest-time, watching in frustration as the weeds grow alongside the wheat; the birds wait for the tiny mustard seed to grow into a large shrub; and the woman baking bread must wait for the leaven to spread its way through the dough until the whole loaf is mysteriously leavened

In our current world we do not like to wait. We find ways to minimize the time we wait. We want things when we want them. We want things how we want them. And most of us have a hard time tolerating things when they aren't that way. But when we do this, we are wanting to create the world in our image, rather than recognize God's will in the way the world is. In being patient, we are offered the opportunity to search out and understand God's will.

In these parables Jesus is warning the crowd that, though what they were hoping for would indeed come soon, God's judgment might not be as straightforward as they thought. Jesus' hearers then, and now, need to think their understanding of Judgment through differently now that they have encountered Jesus.

We can see all of this if we just examine the first parable in which Jesus is actually relating a commonly known occurrence in the world of his time – in fact that the Romans had laws prohibiting neighbors from sowing darnel to ruin their competitors' crops. If we were to do an Ignatian contemplation of this parable, we might indeed find ourselves to be the eager servants, quick to point out the

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presence of evil in the field, and even quicker to volunteer to uproot it. Like the servants, we might be tempted to try and remove the darnel, but we are told by Jesus through the householder that the risk is that we lose the wheat in the process. Now in Jesus' explanation at the end of the Gospel, he explains how the angels will reap at the Judgment day. I dare say some priests, and parishioners, might enjoy a homily focused on the plight of the evil ones, the darnel – who will be burned.

Imagine for a moment how we are like the servants, we judge others and point out sins in other people, and yet in this parable, which we must remind ourselves is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, the householder is full of practical wisdom, knowing that to reap too early might destroy the good crop, and that the darnel can be gathered later and burnt. But this burning had a practical purpose, since darnel was a source of energy, warmth, etc. for the householder. Jesus knew that he was talking to Pharisees and others who might have a strong view of who the 'good guys' were, but this might not have been true. We live in a world today where we have self-righteous people who are quick to judge and who, in their opinion, need to keep God's law by reminding everyone else about it. But this isn't the Kingdom of God, because God does not work this way.

Though the servants want a God who is a powerful Judge, our first reading describes the reason why our God is powerful. It says: "You who are sovereign in strength judge with mildness, and with great forbearance you govern us;" The first reading describes God as powerful precisely because he is patient and lenient, God teaches that the righteous person must be kind. He says: "For your strength is the source of righteousness, and your sovereignty over all causes you to spare all." God here is showing us, I think, that he will be slow to judge, and lenient because he is all-powerful – this is not to downplay his judgment, but rather to emphasise the possibility, and God's hope, of all of us returning to God, of saying sorry and repenting. As Jesus can turn water into wine, so the Son of Man might allow for darnel to change into wheat, for the evil sons and daughters to become good. And even though we know there is evil in the world, just as the darnel might serve a useful purpose, so God can draw straight with crooked lines and can use the presence of evil to be an occasion for goodness to become apparent, since God desires that all be saved. In the second reading we hear how when

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we are weak and have given into evil and may have even forgotten how to pray, God will send the Spirit to pray in our place. This is an example of God's salvific love for us. We should only desire to return that love as best we can.

Elsewhere, in John's Gospel, we read that it was God's will that the Son not lose anyone. I do believe that God's yes to us, is greater than any of our no's to God. This parable talks about the final judgment, and as I have said, has to do with waiting and having patience. It is reasonable to hope that God's divine patience outlasts any of our human stubbornness. And just as we must allow for God's spirit to convert our hearts, we must also guard against mistakenly judging when that is God's prerogative alone. Whenever we pray the Mass we pray the words that our faithful departed might be saved, since their faith is known to God alone.

Yes, we believe that God will judge us, but we have the hope that he will be a good judge and judge us with mercy and compassion. Let us not waste time then but truly examine ourselves and see where we need to convert – so that we might use this time given to us to become righteous.

We must also be aware that sometimes what we thought was bad, might actually not have been. In many areas of our church and world, and especially through the example of Pope Francis, we are appreciating anew how what we previously condemned as evil, has turned out to be good, not a curse but a blessing. We need to ask God for patience and wisdom so that we can fully appreciate the outworking of God's plan in our time.

Our gospel ends today with Jesus explaining that the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father, and he says "let he who has ears, hear!". We will all shine like the sun because at that time we will have had all the imperfections removed from us, and will be truly shining forth God's glory as we are made perfect images of God. But this removal will not be instantaneous. Jesus wanted his followers, and ourselves, to live with the tension of believing that the kingdom was indeed arriving in and through his own work, and that this kingdom would come, and would fully arrive, not all in a bang but, as the other parables tell us, through a process like the slow growth of a plant or the steady leavening of a loaf. We must, in other words, remain patient that God is active and

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working in our life, and in others, and we must not rush. We must rather pray for each other, that we all might freely choose to love God and to allow his love to shine forth from our hearts so that others might choose the same.

Let us remind ourselves today as we try to wait with patience, that when we want God to act immediately, we should remember with faith that he has already acted when he sent us Jesus, and who in turn, sent the Spirit. God's actions are a cause for hope in us – let us pray that we might not lose our faith, hope and love in God.

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