

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

“The Kingdom of heaven may be likened to a man who sowed good seed in his field. While everyone was asleep, his enemy came and sowed weeds all through the wheat...The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...the smallest of all seeds, yet, when fully grown, it is the largest of plants...”



Matthew 13, 24-43

My immediate response to hearing the parable of the wheat and the weeds is to acknowledge that I live in an imperfect world - a world in which good and bad exist side by side and where good and bad will struggle with one another until the Kingdom of God becomes a reality. But a little more reflection brings me to realize that there are weeds and wheat within all of us, that every one of us possesses within ourselves a capacity for both good and evil. We all have the inclination to reach out in compassion to others in need and to do good things out of love. We also know how we can behave selfishly, ignore others in need and allow fear to control our thoughts and actions. We're all capable of taking the moral high ground whenever we think a situation demands it, but, equally, we can find all kinds of excuses to justify our actions when we really know that they are motivated by self-interest. Jesus recognized that this kind of struggle goes on within each of us and, in this parable, challenges us to be wheat for a world that often seems to be being choked by weeds.

Our daily papers and TV news bulletins are full of stories of the evils that abound in our world. We are confronted with incidents of terrorism, torture and war crimes, we hear of racism, prejudice, domestic violence and abuse of all kinds. A Christmas cartoon I came across some time back captured the situation well: there was Santa, sitting on a large chair in a shopping mall waiting to receive children on his lap and to hear their requests, but glancing over his shoulder at the line to make sure that all the children coming to him were passing through the metal detector. That's how wary we are of the "weeds" that threaten our security.

But let's not lose sight of the nourishing and life-giving "wheat" that is also within us and around us and of the tiny "mustard seeds" of hope and potential that we and others sow.

Just this week, as I sat in airport lounges waiting for delayed flights, I read a book called *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif*. It's the very moving story of Najaf Mazari, an Afghani asylum seeker who was tortured by the Taliban, who was forced to flee to Pakistan, leaving behind his wife and baby daughter, and who eventually paid a people-smuggler to bring him to Australia. His passage was paid by contributions gathered from every member of his extended family who believed that he might be the only one fortunate enough and young enough to escape to safety and continue the family line. Through an extraordinary succession of events, Najaf eventually found his way, with more

than 90 other asylum seekers, to Ashmore reef. Then, courtesy of the Australian Navy and Immigration Dept. officials, he was transferred to Woomera Detention Centre. After a long, drawn-out struggle, he was granted permanent residency in Australia and, in time, took out Australian citizenship. With the help of new-found friends, Najaf worked long and hard at his craft of rug-making until he saved enough money to fly his wife and daughter to Australia. Grateful to all who have assisted him and comfortably secure from the profits of his rug-making business, he is now doing what he can to assist struggling Afghanis in his home town of Mazar-e-Sharif to find a better quality of life:

“One way in which I try to solve the problem of my good fortune is to share it in every way I can with those in Mazar-e-Sharif who need some comfort in their lives. I have joined with friends to start a fund that will build schools and buy ambulances for the people of Mazar-e-Sharif. I am not the United Nations, but surely I can help in a small way. Helping in small ways is good. I really appreciate my Australian friends who have helped me set up the Mazar Development Fund...”

Najaf Mazari is a devout Muslim. However, his gratitude to God and the practical steps he has taken to help other Afghanis resonate with the “mustard-seed faith” which Jesus points to in another of today’s gospel parables. Such faith is the ability to see the potential for good in even the smallest of things and the most unlikely of people, and finding within ourselves the courage and perseverance to unlock that potential. People the world over long for peace and community and justice. The first steps for satisfying such longing will be found in everyday acts of kindness and compassion and care that each of us are capable of doing. Jesus invites us to embrace “mustard-seed” faith - to trust and believe that even the simplest acts of kindness and forgiveness and encouragement can eventually produce a harvest of peace and justice and respect for all. People like Najaf Mazari can be the inspiration for us to work for such outcomes - one person, one family, one community, one village at a time.