

Wis 12:13,16-19 Ps85:5-6,9-10,15-16 Rm8: 26-27 Mt 13:24-43

Reflecting on the gospel parable of the wheat and the weeds prompted me to recall a visit to Warsaw some years ago. I remembered seeing a sculpture of Adolf Hitler praying on his knees, on display in the former Warsaw Ghetto, the place where so many Jews were killed or sent to their deaths by Hitler's regime. The work "HIM", by Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan, attracted many visitors, but also raised considerable controversy. The work was visible only from a distance and while the artist did not make explicit what Hitler is praying for, organisers suggested its purpose was to make people reflect on the nature of evil.

Viewers saw only the back of the small figure praying in the courtyard and because of its small size it appeared to be a harmless school boy. It seemed to me that the artist was suggesting that every criminal was once a tender, innocent and defenceless child. Others found that any such 'positive' depiction of Hitler was totally unacceptable.

A similar clash of outlooks is presented within the parable, between the farmer and his servants. The latter wanted the immediate, total rejection of the 'evil' of the weeds. In contrast the farmer has a much more moderate, patient and long-term approach. He understands that a rash and harsh response to the weeds would damage his quality crop. He has the breadth of vision to see the bigger picture and to understand that patience, moderation and acceptance of difference, is essential to ensuring a fruitful outcome. He recognises that all of us are a mixture of good and evil and that it takes time and wisdom to discover which tendency has come to dominate our character. He is at ease with the complexity and ambiguity that is at the heart of reality. He can accept that there is goodness in every 'monster' and evil in every 'good' person. His attitude reflects the qualities of God expressed in the first reading and Psalm - "never judged unjustly" 'lenient to all', 'mild in judgment', "after sin you will grant repentance", a "God of mercy and compassion".

These are the attitudes and perspectives which were lived out and exemplified by Jesus in his ministry - rather than showing any rejection of sinners, he made them his priority. He could see and accept the limitations of Judas and Peter. He welcomed the sinful Zaccheus and enabled his conversion. His compassion for the woman at the well enabled her to move to faith in him and a new beginning.

This Parable reminds us that the wheat needs time to flourish and while it is the ultimate priority, the weeds have to be accepted and allowed to grow alongside and become intertwined with the wheat until the harvest. A separation will occur but it will be after patient waiting by a God who wants to give us every possible opportunity for repentance and conversion.

Our society is experiencing a time of division, and an emphasis on difference, with people retreating into various ideological camps. The 'culture wars' can promote simplistic understandings of complex issues, and can easily encourage a defensive, hostile attitude to 'the other'. In contrast, these parables present a vision of patience, moderation, inclusion, tolerance, acceptance and awareness of our moral complexity.

My gardener came in for his usual tea and chat, as I was finishing these reflections. He was agitated, complaining bitterly about how the recent few days of sunshine, followed by rain,

had resulted in a carpet of weeds among the shrubs. He proposed drastic action – strong weed killers would solve the problem. I suggested an alternative approach. To avoid risk to the shrubs, let the weeds grow until they could easily be distinguished, and then use a strimmer to ‘separate’ them. He had ears to listen.