

## 16<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

a sermon preached by Fr. John-Francis Friendship SCP  
at S. Andrew's Church, Romford  
Sunday, July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011

---

Roms. 8:12-25 and Matt. 13: 24-30

---

### INTRODUCTION

One of the unique features of this parish is that it contains the last working farm on the eastern edge of London. Crown Farm is, of course, one of the oldest farms in the Borough and when I stand waiting for a bus at Jutsums Lane I can find myself dreaming of being in the middle of the countryside rather than opposite a car showroom!

Many of Jesus' parables draw inspiration from scenes of rural life. Last week he spoke of a sower who went out to sow; this week he expands the analogy to offer the parable of weeds among the wheat to focus attention on how his disciples should live together.

For some, not least in the church, weeds should always be uprooted. As a gardener I can spend hours pulling up what I regard as weeds because they don't belong in the perfect garden I am trying to create. But weeds are tricky things – sometimes you have to let them grow before it's clear what they are – a weed or a flower? And many times I've managed to make the wrong discernment!

### DEVELOPMENTS IN SOCIETY

As a society we are constantly facing decisions about how to respond to developments in our midst. Terrorism, anti-social behaviour, illegal immigration and so on are just three examples of issues that demand attention. And, I guess, many of us have views – maybe strong views, on these and how to solve them. Recently the debate of just what it means to be 'English' has reared once again. The Scots seem to have a clear identity, as do the Welsh. But what about the English? Are we to allow extreme groups such as the English Defence League to determine our identity? Should we 'ban the burkha', or is it an essential element of our national identity (developed, let it be said, in the fires of the Reformation period) that we seek to be an inclusive society?

The problems associated with rapid change brought about by scientific or medical discoveries are the consequences of the fact that our world is not stagnant: the forces of growth constantly present us with situations demanding fresh thinking. As Paul said in his letter to the Romans: *'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now...'*

Those words graphically describe how our world is always in a state of giving birth to the new. And, with any new birth, there will often be pain. The church, as well as society, are affected by such creative tensions and the danger for both is to seek to prevent such movements. We are all prone to what has been called the 'Canute Syndrome' of which one business writer said:

*'You might believe you can turn back the tide and you might have invested years of blood, sweat and tears in establishing a great 'business model' generating growth, profits and reputation. But come the time that investment is challenged, emotions cloud the view. You fail to see that the world has changed because you are reluctant to see it?'*

Jesus' parable reminds us of the importance of allowing growth to occur and not rushing to stem that growth. There has always been a tendency to want to create a 'pure' society, or even a 'pure' church which offers clear and straightforward rules to govern life. To create Laws which allow some to flourish and has no place for 'weeds'. But this parable which Jesus offers clearly says that both must be allowed to grow together.

## **DISCERNMENT**

The danger of 'perfectionism' – believing that perfection can and should be attained – afflicts both individuals and societies.

I say 'afflict' because it can so easily become an unhealthy quest that leads to neurosis. Some take the call to lead a holy life as meaning they have to attain a certain level of perfection. They tend to be the ones who get labelled as 'holier than thou'. Others, of course, avoid the problem by not seeking to grow in their relationship with God, fearful that they might get so labelled. So do we just sit back and allow the weeds to grow to such an extent that they choke the wheat? Clearly not.

## **PAUL AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH**

The words concerning growth in our relationship with God which St. Paul wrote to the early Christians in Rome deal with the struggle that *does* go on for those seeking to develop that relationship. He recognizes the force of competing attractions and counsels that we should place our hope in God. *"When we cry, 'Abba, Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God."*

In this desire to give expression to that relationship there will be many movements which will occur as the development of that relationship becomes more important for us. But Paul also realises that it is the whole of us – weeds as well as wheat – which are taken into that relationship. At one point he writes: *'Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.'* Whatever that 'thorn' was, he recognised that his 'thorn' played an important role. To be fully human means accepting the weeds and wheat of life.

## **THE SHADOW**

The psychologist Carl Jung also understood this. He explored the nature of the unconscious "shadow" that lives in each soul. The 'shadow' gets filled with all the things that we repress because we don't want to know them. It is the 'rubbish bin' of the soul where we dump our private sins – our unexamined greed, narcissistic selfishness and all the rest which we can never seem to rid ourselves.

Out of sight this rubbish rots and pollutes and unconsciously drives our actions. We may think that 'out of sight is out of mind' yet this rubbish controls us behind the scenes of our conscious thought. Jung believed that we needed to learn to recycle these weeds. By acknowledging them and knowing they are always there, we are better able to understand ourselves, to grow and to act with true compassion towards ourselves and others. Just as we are learning to recycle and compost rubbish, so examining our 'shadow' side is healthier than trying to uproot our sins and dumping them into the rubbish sack. Whether we are talking about weeds or rubbish, it is a caution that our quest for purity can lead to wrong ends when we ignore what is within our own soul, our church or our society.

## CONCLUSION

The terrorist may be someone else's freedom fighter. An eating disorder can mask problems with self-identity. That person in our midst who seems so out of place can teach us much about ourselves. Weeds have their place to play in life as Jesus' parable reminds us. Paul stresses the importance of focussing into Christ whilst accepting our 'shadow-side' – our personal 'thorn-in-the-flesh'. The American poet, Robert Bly, talks about the way in which we must learn to 'absorb' the shadow, the weeds of our life, to 'recycle' them that they might become life-giving. After his resurrection Jesus still bore the wounds of the crucifixion, now absorbed into his life. Perfectionism does not belong within Christianity, but the desire to give expression to a relationship with Christ does.

And, in that relationship the whole of our humanity must be absorbed. *"We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved."* (Roms 8: 22-24a)

*Amen.*