

Fear not

Brian McKinlay
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Isaiah 44:6-8; Psalm 86:11-17; Romans 8.12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

A few weeks ago, *Ordo Virtutum*, Hildegard of Bingen's musical play of the virtues was beautifully presented in our local church. In the play, the Virtues contend with the Devil for the salvation of the Soul who is the central character. Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds puts us in need of quite a few of the Virtues: Mercy, Patience, Humility, Love, Fear of God, Faith, and Hope.

In the well-known story of the sower and the seed, some seed falls on good ground and some on unproductive ground. But in the parable of the wheat and the weeds all the seed, wheat and weeds, is sown in good ground.

"The kingdom of heaven", Jesus said, "may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field." So the field was well prepared and the seed was good. But, "while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat." No one is blamed for sleeping. Preparing and sowing a field is work and sleep was well earned. An enemy was to blame for what had happened — not the workers and not the master.

The text refers to a particular weed that is still a nuisance in Palestine — known in English as 'Bearded Darnel' (*Lolium temulentum*). It's toxic and must be separated from the wheat; but it looks quite like wheat. It can be separated very carefully by the reapers during the harvest. Otherwise, the Darnel seeds have to be picked out one by one from the grain. The master's solution to the enemy's action was wise: to let the weeds and the good wheat grow together until the harvest and then, at harvest time, collect the weeds and dispose of them.

We are encouraged to be patient (that's the first Virtue we need this morning). Bad things, evil things, happen and keep happening, but the master's wisdom will bring the harvest to an abundant conclusion. Meanwhile, we need to get on with the work at hand, to be patient and to trust the master's wisdom. So far, so good.

A little later, the disciples ask Jesus privately for an interpretation of the parable. The text says that, the one who sows the good seed is Jesus, the good seed are the children of the kingdom, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels, and so on. This is, of course, an allegory — where a story is told in order actually to tell another story that is similar. The scholars tell us that, in the Greek text, the vocabulary of the interpretation of the parable is very different from Jesus' vocabulary elsewhere in the gospels. It's likely that these aren't Jesus own words.

The gospel writer interprets the weeds as representing the children of the evil one. Satan's great sin was pride and so it is with his children. The writer uses these words to attack the spiritual pride and vanity of the religious rulers of the day, who relied on their knowledge, law and traditions for their religious status.

"Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

As I read these words, I found them quite unnerving. It's good that all causes of sin will be taken away, but what if I am on the wrong track and get burned up with the weeds? What of others who might get thrown into the fire? "How should I respond?" I thought to myself.

My first response is to remember that I am utterly dependent on the mercy and goodness of God. When I pray, each Sunday and every day, "Lord have mercy," I need to mean it, with every fibre of my being.

And what is God's reply? From Isaiah (44.6-8): "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? ... Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it?" "I am the rock", God says. Do not fear. Be not afraid.

Again and again, scripture urges us not to be afraid, to fear not. The encouragement to "fear not" is at the beginning of the gospel and at the end of the gospel. The angel Gabriel said to Mary, "Fear not". When he appeared to the disciples after the resurrection, Jesus said, "Fear not."

In the Psalm this morning: "You, Lord, are a God gracious and compassionate: slow to anger, full of goodness and truth. Turn to me and be merciful, give your strength to your servant."

Similarly in Romans chapter 8: "You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear." The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are God's children.

Not only do we need patience as we wait for the weeds to be taken away and evil and suffering to end, Romans tells us that the whole creation, waits to be "set free from its bondage to decay" and to "obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

What comes from patience? Hope. "For in hope we were saved. ... If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." "Hope makes no one ashamed," it says in another part of Romans.

In Hildegard's play, Humility is portrayed as the Queen of the Virtues. We are humble if we are patient, relying on God's mercy, but without fear.

When we see all that is wrong in the world and the challenges faced by the church, it is tempting for us to be fearful. In a kind of panic we can readily look to ourselves for every answer. "I must find the answer. I will find the answer. Maybe, I am the answer!" Humility disappears; God's mercy is forgotten.

Strangely, fear and pride are bedfellows. Yet it is love that gets rid of fear, God's love, and our love for God and each other (I John 4.18).

Patience and humility, love and not fear ... all because of the mercy of God. Remember Galatians 5? The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

Well, all this sounds rather ordinary for a sermon doesn't it? A nice exhortation to faith and virtuous life. Yet, right now in our parish, we are invited to fear not and to experience these things in practice.

As in the parable, there's work to be done, and plenty of it. But let's not be fearful. Let's be patient with God and with each other as we find God's answers to all that we need in the weeks ahead. This little parish is God's precious gift to us and to those around us, and we love it dearly. Yet it is in God's keeping.

So let's be humble in playing our part with energy and confidence that God's spirit is with us. Let's be patient when sometimes things aren't quite as we would expect them to be. Let's each be ready to be gently guided by God. Let's trust in God's goodness and mercy to our church family and to each of us. Let's fear not.