

“Kindness” - 16th Sunday (A)

This Sunday’s Gospel caught me unawares. Gospels about Judgement Day are normally reserved for the end of the Church Year, during the bleakness of November, not the rain and occasional sun of July. But as you probably know, on Sundays the First Reading, which is taken from the Old Testament, is chosen for the light it casts on the Gospel. So if we want to understand the harvest of wheat and darnel, remember tonight’s words from the Book of Wisdom. What did the author of it say to God? ‘You are mild in judgement, you govern us with great lenience.’

When he was a young man, St Monica’s son, St Augustine, fled his mother’s attempts to convert him to Christianity. But then, in Milan, he got to know the bishop, St Ambrose. This is what Augustine said of meeting Ambrose:

‘My heart warmed to him, not at first as a teacher of the truth, which I had quite despaired of finding in [the] Church, but simply as a man who showed me kindness.’¹

St Augustine became a Christian and one of the great teachers of the Catholic Church not because of St Ambrose’s great sermons but because of his kindness which, St Augustine recognised, was a reflection of the kindness of God. Or, again, as Wisdom put it: ‘You are mild in judgement, you govern us with great lenience.’

So Jesus teaches us in today’s parable that God is kind because he gives us time. Yes, one day our actions shall be judged - did we love? - but rather than risk losing any of us, God does not harvest us until the last moment. He wants us to grow tall in love and strong in faith and so we are not gathered in before many opportunities to prove ourselves. We are, however, all good at procrastinating, at putting things off. One of Shakespeare’s most haunting lines is given to Richard II after he has lost the throne: ‘I wasted time, now time wastes me.’ God forbid that we should waste our time and let any opportunity to do good go past.

So let’s be kind, like God. To be kind is to see the needs of others and help and, perhaps most difficult, remain calm and loving when others are annoying and impatient. No, kindness is not easy. It reveals how much God loves us and why it converted St Augustine.

In my first parish, a woman in her sixties became a Catholic because when she was little there were two Catholic families on her street. When one of the mothers died, the other family rallied round and made sure that the bereaved husband and children had everything they needed. A little girl saw kindness and sixty years later she found the Church. God gives us time. May we use it well, for kindness sake.

¹ *Confessions* V, 13