

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Weeds Among The Wheat

There is great argument over the gospel explanations given to the parables. In the text it is Jesus who tells the parables, and Jesus who explains them. But the scholars aren't happy. First, they say, parables aren't *meant* to be explained by their narrator - any more than jokes are meant to be explained by comedians. If they have to be explained, they aren't jokes any more. The joy of a joke comes from the instant understanding between the teller and the listener. So with a parable: it ends with the words: *If you have ears to hear, listen to what I've said!* - and the listener has to make his own mind up about the meaning of the story - *and that's the point*. So we can be pretty sure that the explanations of the parables stand an excellent chance of being the work of the church authorities (apostles, preachers, early bishops, and the evangelists themselves) whose explanations - perhaps offered to congregations far away from the land where parables *don't* get explained - came to be regarded as part of Jesus' original parable.

### Forbearance Or Fireworks?

Matthew's explanation for the parable of the weeds in the field is a good example. Separate the parable from its explanation, and take a good look at it. It is one of the stories of Jesus - his style is unmistakable. What's its theme? The surprise-factor, the interest of the story, is surely the contrast between the instincts of the servants and the decision of the master. *The servants* want to dig out the weeds and make the field clean. As the people who work on it, they find the sight of the weeds offensive, and perhaps even shameful: it is as if they had done their work badly. But *the master disagrees*. He knows that the pulling-out of the weeds will cause massive disruption. The boots of the weeders, the digging of the hoes, the turning-over of the soil will leave the field devastated. Not only will the weeds go, but half the good crop as well. He decides he will live with the weeds until the time of the harvest.

### Good And Evil Grow Together

The meaning is plain. *We* can't bear to see the evil that is in the world. We sometimes pray for the Lord to come and burn it out, punishing, destroying, cleansing. (Of course, we seldom include *our* share in the evil of the world in this blanket-bombing policy; we're a special case, deserving mercy!) But In this vengeful prayer,

God is seldom on our side. *God* is willing to live with the imperfections of the world, in divine patience. So although he has the power to destroy it, he chooses to leave evil unpunished, for the sake of the good that grows among it. This is what makes God different, greater than we are. It is sacred, this goodness of God; it is our salvation. We pray for him to grant vengeance, at our own peril.

### I Like A Nice Fire

Matthew does not focus on the forbearance of God when it comes to the explanation of this parable. I feel sure that he is giving himself away. Come to think of it, Matthew has a somewhat unhealthy fixation with bonfires, and he picks up the theme of the day of judgement with relish. *Maybe God allows the weeds to survive for the moment*, he seems to say, *but give him time, and what a conflagration lies in store!* Now, I ask myself, does that really do justice to the tone and content of the original story? I don't feel that it does. I know I shouldn't quarrel with Evangelists! I'm not saying that it is a bad thought or an untrue one; if it were, it wouldn't be in the Gospel tradition. But it doesn't seem to me to be a good explanation for this particular parable. By the way: next Sunday's gospel-reading will give us another explanation, and another bonfire - which will be even stranger!

### Give It Time

Whatever we do with the explanation, I am keen to retain the original tone of the story, and to hear the wise and gentle voice of the Father, calling for mercy and moderation in a world of imperfection - so that nothing God loves may be lost. The owner of the field is more clement and wiser than his servants. God is wiser than we are. When we pray, we build a world of dreams, and ask God to enter it and, if he will, bless it with his promise. We pray for more love, for more wisdom, for more power to act under God's grace. Let us build this world bigger than our hopes, and leave God to raise the wire high. We should always leave room for mercy. *Fr Philip*