

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time      Year A

Ibn Saud, the first King of Saudi Arabia, was faced with a problem of judgement. A woman came to him demanding the death sentence for a man who had killed her husband. The man had been in a palm tree gathering dates when he had slipped and fallen, killing the woman's husband beneath. Ibn Saud inquired: was the fall intentional? Had the two men been enemies? The woman knew neither the man nor why he had fallen, but, in accordance with the law, she demanded the blood price due to her. "In what form will you have the compensation?" Ibn Saud asked her. The widow demanded the head of the guilty party. The king tried to dissuade her, pointing out that she needed the money and that the execution of this man would benefit neither her nor her children. But the woman was insistent, arguing that it was not right that the man who had killed her husband should be allowed to live in the community of good people. He should be rooted out immediately.

Ibn Saud said: "It is your right in law to demand compensation and it is also your right in law to ask for this man's life. But it is my right in law to decree how he shall die. You shall take this man with you and he shall be tied to the foot of a palm tree; then you yourself shall climb to the top of the tree and cast yourself down from that height. In that way you shall take his life as he took your husband's." The king paused for a moment. "Or perhaps, he added,"you would prefer to take the blood money?" The widow took the money.

That demand for instant judgement, for rooting out those who have done harm in the community, for bringing the last judgement into the present tense, is something that is seriously challenged in today's scripture. The author of Wisdom tries to answer the pressing question: why does God allow the bad to flourish? Why is God so patient and

moderate with Israel's enemies? He argues that God's moderation is not a result of weakness: but God *chooses* in favour of governing "with great lenience." So God's mercy is heaped on everyone in sight, even on traditional enemies. And in this there is a purpose:

*By acting thus you have taught a lesson to your people how a virtuous man must be kindly to his fellow men, and you have given your sons the good hope that after sin you will grant repentance.*

The people are asked to share in the same spirit of God and act with kindness to their fellow human beings. The argument is that God's leniency will give the people of Israel the good hope that when they wrong God, they will surely benefit from his forgiveness. This same hope is enshrined in the Our Father: "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*"

The scandal of God's patience and forbearance with wrongdoers appears again in the Gospel. The kingdom of heaven is compared to a farmer who is confronted with a serious problem: his field is alive with wheat and a poisonous weed, darnel, which can only be distinguished from the wheat when the growth is advanced. The farmer's servants want to weed out the darnel, but the farmer tells them to leave it alone; he is worried that uprooting the weeds will endanger the wheat. He orders that no premature attempt be made to separate them. Thus both the wheat and the darnel are allowed to grow, and only at the final harvest are they separated.

The message of the parable is something that Jesus lived throughout his ministry. He reached out to all sorts of people, mixing with whores, priests, crooks, scribes, politicians, children, tax collectors. Religious separatism was something Jesus refused to advocate, making it his business to seek out and save the lost. The Pharisees, those whose name

means “*the separated ones*”, criticized him for associating with the wrong crowd. But Jesus knew that all communities are a mixture of the good and bad, the crooked and the cracked. And further, that it isn't always easy to tell which is which. In the end Jesus is the one weeded out by the authorities and thrown on to the killing fields.

The message of the parable still challenges the Church today. It is not the place of the Church to set up inquisitions, support witch hunts, organize purges to free the field for its own approved supporters. The Church is not God. *As Christians we have no authority to pronounce the final judgement on anyone.* The last word cannot be said about anyone until death, and then it is God's part, not ours, to say it. Paul underlines the same point when he tells the Church in Corinth:

*There must be no passing of premature judgement. Leave that until the Lord comes.” (1 Cor.4:5)*

Paul, like Jesus, was aware that we can get it terribly wrong about people. There might be another story, another perspective, another time. After all, Paul got it terribly wrong about Jesus when he went around weeding out his followers. Paul himself changed from being a real weed to a real apostle, even though some people thought the last word had been said about him. But if the final judgement is precisely that – *final* – the good hope is that there will be some changes before then. And that hope should never be denied anyone, least of all by the followers of Jesus.