

His Merciful Power

Homily for July 22-23 2023
16th Sunday Ordinary Time

Dear brothers and sisters, today's first lesson is taken from the last book to be written in the Old Testament, the Wisdom of Solomon. It is a book that gives us the perspective on life that is an expression of this phrase in the Lord's Prayer:

“Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”

What does today's passage tell us about the Kingdom perspective on how God sees and relates to us? This verse is the heart of Wisdom 12, the chapter where we find ourselves today.

***For you show your strength when people doubt the completeness of your power,
and you rebuke any insolence among those who know it.¹***

Let me unpack this for you, beginning with the first clause. God shows his strength to those who question his power, and his active involvement in the world. This is comforting to know isn't it? It is this theme that is at play in the first of our parables for today. The story of the wheat that has the weeds sown among them leads the workers in the field to question the farmer. Didn't you sow good seed? Why is it then there are all these weeds here as well? This is something that we find baffling about life. The evidence often can lead us to conclude God is without power because the wheat and the weeds continue to grow together, and it at times appears the weeds choke and kill the wheat. Evil so often seems to trump the good. And here is the point about the weeds, they actually look very much like the wheat, it is hard to tell them apart. And so to those who struggle with making sense of a world where many people, including some of us here, - like me, doubt the completeness of God's power, he shows his strength. But how does he do this? Listen to these verses:

***your sovereignty over all causes you to spare all.² Although you are sovereign in strength,
you judge with mildness, and with great forbearance you govern us; for you have
power to act whenever you choose.³***

His sovereignty and strength are expressed most fully by his willingness to spare us, to treat us with mildness. Although he could act in any way he chooses, his priority is to choose the way

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Wis 12:17). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Wis 12:16). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Wis 12:18). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

and clemency and mercy. Listen to how today's psalm picks up on this expression of God's strength.

*⁵ For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving,
abounding in mercy to all who call on you. ⁴
For you are great and do wondrous things,
you alone are God. ⁵
¹⁵ But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in mercy and faithfulness. ⁶*

God shows his strength to those who doubt the completeness of his power by this clearest expression of his love. This is the theme at the heart of both Wisdom and Psalm 86. For you see mercy does not temper God's power but manifests it. God's mercy and kindness and forgiveness are not merely added to his power but lie at the heart of it. Love, unselfish love, goodwill, is the secret of power. It is the strongest thing in the world.

The most powerful deed anyone ever accomplished in history was the supreme act of love and mercy: God incarnate offering up his own life, his own body and blood on the cross, letting himself be tortured and murdered, to save us from our sins, to give us eternal life in place of eternal death. That made the bigger difference than anything else that ever happened. The Big Bang itself, the deed that created the universe, was not more powerful than the crucifixion, because creation only gave us earth, but the cross gave us heaven.

The wind and the sun once argued about who had more power over mankind. The wind said: "I can blow so hard that I blow a man's clothes off his body and make him naked." So he tried. He blew and blew, harder and harder. But the harder the wind blew, the more the man hugged his clothes to his body, and they stuck like glue. Then it was the sun's turn, and the sun simply came out, and the man was so warmed that he gradually took off all his clothes, one by one, by his own free choice.⁷ This is the lesson from Wisdom.

This brings us to the second part of the verse I quoted at the beginning of today's homily.

and you rebuke any insolence among those who know it.

What is insolence? It is an excessive confidence and boldness – it is the wind which presumes upon God so that such people lack mercy and compassion in their own lives and might even try to manipulate others through religious authoritarianism and control. Some of the worst forms of

⁴ [*The Holy Bible*](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Ps 86:5). (2006). Ignatius Press.

⁵ [*The Holy Bible*](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Ps 86:10). (2006). Ignatius Press.

⁶ [*The Holy Bible*](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Ps 86:15). (2006). Ignatius Press.

⁷ Kreeft, Peter. *Food for the Soul: Reflections on the Mass Readings (Cycle A)* (p. 645). Kindle Edition.

abuse is religious abuse where leaders pronounce God's name in ways that intimidate and overwhelm people like a gale-force wind.

It is to address those with a distorted view of power that Jesus tells the second and third parables for today. Now we might think the mustard seed parable is a warm Middle Eastern story that has a pastoral image. A tree where the birds will come and build their nests. But here is the thing, there is nothing particularly majestic about a mustard tree. It was an invasive bush that people tried to get rid of. No one in their right mind would have a grove of mustard trees. This is the point of this parable. From the perspective of the world the Kingdom of Heaven is not impressive, there is nothing to write home about here. But Jesus uses this seemingly pesky overgrown weed to describe the kingdom. It is unimpressive, intrusive. People want to get rid of it. But it will persevere and what starts out as a small seed will grow and reproduce and expand and will become the home for peoples world-wide – the meaning of the birds making their nests in the tree.

And what about the leaven mixed in with the flour. Well here is the first thing you need to know, three measures of flour is equivalent to sixty pounds. And leaven is representative of sin. So why is the kingdom of heaven like leaven mixed with lots of flour? The flour is representative of God's grace and when our sin is brought into contact with grace, it is transformed. And this is what we see down through two millennia of Church History. As we come to the Church, where the flour of grace is made available to us something happens to us. We discover ever more what it means to encounter the strength of God's power in his merciful love and forgiveness.

One of the ways to look at the weeds in the first parable is as our imperfections, our sins, – like the leaven, the yeast. The Church is composed of people who are called to struggle against sinful tendencies so as to lead to virtuous lives. We are on the path of holiness but have not yet arrived. This means that we are to live as those who can bring our doubts and struggles to Jesus and share them with each other. Listen to how our passage from Wisdom ends:

***Through such works (that is the works of God's mercy) you have taught your people
that the righteous must be kind,
and you have filled your children with good hope,
because you give repentance for sins.⁸***

To be close to God is to be kind, to live with hope because we know that God wants nothing more than to give repentance for sins as we seek to grow in trusting in the completeness of his merciful power. To experience God's mercy therefore finds us enfolded in the dough of grace so that we too know forgiveness in our lives. In turn we are live as hopeful people whose lives are like the aroma of baking bread – this is the aroma of kindness.

Thanks be to Jesus for his teaching today on the merciful power of God in the Kingdom Parables, and Wisdom's profound insight into this attribute of God.

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Wis 12:19). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

