

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Wisdom 12:13,16-19; Psalm 86 (85); Romans 8:26-27; Matthew 13:24-43

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field

Matt 13:24 Jesus put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27 And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ 28 He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ 29 But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30 Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

Matt 13:31 He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

Matt 13:33 He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Matt 13:34 Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. 35 This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.”

Matt 13:36 Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” 37 He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; 38 the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42 and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

(i) The parable of the weeds (darnel, tares) and the wheat and its allegorical explanation are unique to Matthew. The suspicion that we are dealing with Matthean material and even Matthean composition is supported by sampling the vocabulary and noticing how much of it is typical Matthew (compare **8-1-3-0**; weeds **8-0-0-0**; bear fruit **23-0-14-2**; householder **7-1-4-0**; to gather **7-0-1-0**).

(ii) The parable of the mustard seed is found in Mark 4:30-32 and Luke 13:18-19. Matthew omits the opening question in Mark and Luke, possibly because he has used the word *compare* at the very start.

(iii) The parable of the leaven is found in Luke 13:20-21. Matthew’s version is slightly shorter, again omitting the opening rhetorical question.

Thought for the day

Again today we have two versions of the one parable, the original and a later church interpretation or reception. Communities of faith are always “mixed,” in that some people are fully engaged, some are half-hearted and many, perhaps most, are somewhere in between. What to do? The temptation to go for a radical, purified church has been a recurring one across history. The teaching of this parable is let things alone—it is not for us to judge. It could be (we hope!) that less committed believers may change and a welcoming, compassionate approach may enable that to happen.

Prayer

Jesus, your compassion to all inspires us today to recognise our own need of your grace. Help us work on the plank in our own eyes before we dare to recognise, much less to offer to remove, a splinter in our neighbour’s eye.

(iv) The passage on the use of the parables is found in Mark 4:33-34. In Mark, it functions as a pedagogical observation. In Matthew, it is theological, complete with a citation from Psalm 78:2.

(v) It is likely that the opening parable and its interpretation are meant to deal with issues which arose after the resurrection and perhaps even after the first missionary thrusts of Christianity. Together they address a “church” question: what do we do with people who are “in” but not “of”? How do we deal with people who are half-hearted or lukewarm in the community? The broad response is tolerant: leave them alone and at the time of harvest all will be revealed! At the same time, the parable and its allegorical reading function as frames around another series of mini-parables, taken from the common tradition or from the sources used by Matthew and Luke. Both of the mini-parables “comment” on the parable of the weeds. The mustard seed represents astonishing growth, i.e. there is always hope, things can change. The broad “hospitality” of

the mustard tree might itself be a little allegory for the Matthean community to be more welcoming! Secondly, leaven has a kind of inevitability—the bread will rise almost no matter what. The leaven will cause “rising” of its own accord. Matthew thus relativizes the intolerance of insiders.

KIND OF WRITING

There are three kinds of writing here. (i) Straight parables intended to provoke and give rise to changes in attitudes—the mustard seeds and yeast parables. (ii) A short *chreia* in the form of a question, which is answered by a citation. (iii) Allegories—the weeds and the wheat parable is at least incipiently allegorical—the suspicion is confirmed by the decoding at the end. The allegory sets up seven points of comparison:

- 1 The sower = the Son of Man (Jesus).
- 2 The field = the world.
- 3 The good seed = the children of the kingdom.
- 4 The weeds = the children of the evil one.
- 5 The enemy = the devil.
- 6 The harvest = the end of the age (or this world).
- 7 The reapers = angels.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Harvest is used in the OT as an image of judgment, a very natural image of sifting, as found in Psalm 1:4-6. Cf. “It is perhaps on account of us that the time of threshing is delayed for the righteous—on account of the sins of those who inhabit the earth.” (2 Esd 4:39)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Harvest as a judgment metaphor is found in Matthew 3:12; 13:20, 39. Likewise Rev 14:14-20.

ST PAUL

Your boasting is not a good thing. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Cor 5:6-8)

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having

produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. (Phil 1:9-11)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 24 The parable, unlike Jesus’ own parables, is not particularly disturbing—it doesn’t challenge common sense etc. It does, in the form of the allegory, teach moral attitudes and practical approaches. There is, perhaps, a discreet critique of the community members who are quick to evaluate others. It is not really your business! Cf. Romans 14:1-4, which puts its very succinctly indeed.

Verses 25-26 There are *two* sowings, in this parable. The Greek term *zizanian* refers to an especially undesirable weed that *resembles* wheat but has poisonous seeds.

Verses 27-28 You can feel their consternation—a very real thing for us today in the church—and the desire to clean things up.

Verses 29-30 The reply is plain: no, and in any case, it is none your business! The Lord of the harvest will see to it at the right time.

Verses 31-32 The parable of the mustard seed is offered without comment, almost like a zen koan. It does bring together, however, the issues of the preceding parable, i.e. expansion and hospitality. Even though the expansion of the church can bring with it a lowering of commitment, nevertheless, hospitality is the mark of the kingdom.

Verse 33 Even this parable takes up issues raised in the first one: yeast takes time and we have to allow the time for the transformation to take place. And yet, yeast has its own power and inevitability. Likewise the kingdom—do not give up too soon on others, or even on yourself! The quantities are extraordinary: a measure was c. 7 kilos, the total should be 21 kilos — bread for about 100 persons.

Verses 34-35 This rather hopeful read of the function of the parables is in tension with a similar passage between the parable of the sower and its allegorical interpretation. At least here, Jesus speaks in order that they will understand! Frequently in Matthew, you have a fulfillment citation—actually not from “the prophet” but from Psalm 78.

Verses 36-40 A more allegorical reading of the parable is offered, which spells out the original message by “decoding”

it.

Verses 41-42 These verses combine original Jesus material (v. 41) with Matthean commentary (v. 42). The language of Jesus is very apocalyptic and fits with his preaching as an end-time figure. Gnashing of teeth as an expression of punishment is almost unique to Matthew (8-0-1-0).

Verse 43 Nevertheless, it all closes on a brilliantly positive note, not unlike the last parable of the Great Assize in Matthew 25. *Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.* (Daniel 12:3) Cf. *And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.* (Matthew 17:2)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

- 1. The owner of the field who allowed the wheat and the darnel to grow together is a reminder to us to be patient with ourselves and with others when we see everything is not right. Sometimes a preoccupation with the negative (the darnel) can blind us to seeing the positive in our own lives and in the lives of others. When have you found that a willingness to live with the messiness of the present created the conditions for future growth?
- 2. Have you ever found that it was through accepting the darnel that you learned important lessons for life, e.g., learning by making mistakes, or asking stupid questions, or taking foolish risks?
- 3. The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven are reminders that seemingly insignificant things can have very positive results. Have you ever been surprised by the benefit to yourself or others of a kind gesture, a small initiative, or a word of encouragement?

PRAYER

O God, patient and forbearing, you alone know fully the goodness of what you have made. Strengthen our spirit when we are slow and temper our zeal when we are rash, that in your own good time you may produce in us a rich harvest from the seed you have sown and tended.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us

Rom 8:26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how we should pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with inexpressible groanings. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes on behalf of the saints according to God's will.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This second step in Paul's argument is extraordinarily innovative. This is the first time in Jewish and Christian literature that the Spirit of God is said to intercede for us. The teaching here is not unlike the much later Johannine understanding of the Spirit found in John 16:7-15. This "interceding" is the prayer of the Spirit within each one. The teaching is welcome to us today but it may still bear some exploring to see more closely what Paul himself is trying to say.

KIND OF WRITING

In 8:18-30, there are key moments:

- 8:18-25 Future transformation
- 8:26-27 *The role of the Spirit*
- 8:28-30 God's plan of salvation

The verses here are poetically arranged:

In the same way,
the *Spirit* helps us in our weakness,
for we do not *know* how we should pray
but the *Spirit* himself *intercedes*
for us
with inexpressible groanings.

And he who searches our hearts *knows*
the *mind* of the *Spirit*,
because the *Spirit intercedes*
on behalf of the saints
according to God's will.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Paul is speaking to a community which prays and which enjoyed, evidently, the gifts of the Spirit. The Roman Christ-believers know *how* to pray but, in this intermediate time of the already/not yet, they do not know *what* to pray for. All Christian prayer is really some form of "may your kingdom come." What that kingdom is and how it may come is unknown to us with the result that our prayer is one of openness to God's project however and whenever that may evolve.

In this chapter, Paul is extolling the Spirit,

which all believers without distinction have received. We are not to limit this gift of the Spirit to the charismatic gifts—because Paul really means everyone.

This is important for the whole project of Romans. Romans 8 is really a kind of victory hymn, showing how God has come to help of all Adam's descendants by putting us in right relationship through Christ's own victory over the power of death. The justification of believers—God's mercy, love and forgiveness—comes through Jesus' faithfulness. The "sacrifice" of Jesus is not the blood as such but the interior attitude of Jesus, fully open to the will of God and fully ready to live (and die for) the consequences. A mercantile model (the traditional one) simply won't do here. This faithfulness of Jesus is now poured into the hearts of believers through the Holy Spirit. The centrality of justification by faith is evident in Romans 8 as well. The very next verses go on as follows:

And we know that all things work together for good for those who *love* God, who are *called* according to his purpose, because those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also *called*; and those he *called*, he also *justified*; and those he *justified*, he also glorified. (Rom 8:28–30)

It is helpful to translate "justified" by "placed into right relationship." This goes beyond the legal (forensic) or moral understanding of justification. In Paul's mind, this *achieved* by Jesus, *gifted* by the Spirit and *received* by faith. Again, it helps to go back to Romans 5:1-5, where all the key terms are present in advance:

Therefore, since we have been declared *righteous* by *faith*, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have also obtained access by *faith* into this *grace* in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of God's glory. Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance, character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint, because the *love* of God has been *poured* out in our hearts through the *Holy Spirit* who was given to us. (Rom 5:1–5)

RELATED PASSAGES

I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. (Rom 6:19)

But now we have been released from the law, because we have died to what controlled us, so that we may serve in the new life of the Spirit and not under the old written code. (Rom 7:6)

But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is your life because of righteousness. (Rom 8:10)

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery leading again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry, "Abba, Father." (Rom 8:15)

For the kingdom of God does not consist of food and drink, but *righteousness*, peace, and joy in the *Holy Spirit*. (Rom 14:17)

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe in him, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Rom 15:13)

Now we do speak wisdom among the mature, but not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are perishing. Instead we speak the wisdom of God, hidden in a mystery, that God determined before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood it. If they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But just as it is written, "Things that no eye has seen, or ear heard, or mind imagined, are the things God has prepared for those who love him." God has revealed these to us by the Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. (1 Cor 2:6–10)

If someone thinks he knows something, he does not yet know to the degree that he needs to know. But if someone loves God, he is known by God. (1 Cor 8:2–3)

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago (whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows) was caught up to the third heaven. And I know that this man (whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows) was caught up into paradise and heard things too sacred to be put into words, things that a person is not permitted to speak. (2 Cor 12:2–4)

But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we declare it, not to please people but God, who examines our hearts. (1 Thess 2:4)

For my hand shall sustain (*synantilambanō*) him; my arm also shall strengthen him. (LXX Ps 88:22)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 26 The opening phrase is very important: “in the same way.” Paul is drawing a threefold comparison: creation is groaning, believers are groaning and even the Spirit is groaning within. Of course, the “groaning” of the Spirit is different.

“Help”, in Greek a compound verb (*synantilambanō*) is one of many compound verbs in Romans 8, beginning with the preposition “with” (Rom 8:16-17, 22, 26, 28-29, 32). The only other use of this verb in the New Testament illustrates the meaning well: *But Martha was distracted with all the preparations she had to make, so she came up to him and said, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work alone? Tell her to help me.”* (Luke 10:40) The closest Old Testament parallel is LXX Ps 88:2 above, using the same verb.

Human weakness or incapacity has been a constant in Romans. The noun is found in Romans 6:19 (above). The verb is found again in chapter 8: *For God achieved what the law could not do because it was weakened through the flesh.* (Rom 8:3) The reference to chapter 5 is a kind of inclusion: *For while we were still helpless* (lit. weak), *at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.* (Rom 5:6)

This is the only use of the verb “to pray” in Romans. Noun is more frequent: Rom 1:10; 12:12; 15:30, in key places in the letter.

“Not knowing” recurs in 2 Corinthians 12:2-5. The context is closely related, being one of profound spiritual experience. In our context, the Greek has it that we do not know *what* to pray for. This is directly linked to inexpressible, the same idea that comes up in 2 Corinthians 12. One scholar has suggested translating the second part of this verse thus: “What are we to pray for, as we ought? We do not know!” Clearly, it is not that they do not know how to pray or even what things to pray for. Rather, their prayer is one of unknowing, radical openness to God’s project in their lives.

“Intercedes”: the simple compound verb

occurs occasionally in the New Testament (Rom 8:27, 34; 11:2; Heb 7:25). The present form is a double compound with “hyper” in front of it, thus intensifying the meaning. It is found only here in the New Testament and thereafter only in Christian writers. It is thus a neologism of Paul. The ordinary form has a range of meanings: to meet, to approach, to petition, to intercede. The double compound form is more intense: to plead, to intercede. 2 Cor 2:6-10 is very helpful here (above). The assistance of the Spirit is relatively early: *When they arrest you and hand you over for trial, do not worry about what to speak. But say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.* (Mark 13:11)

“Inexpressible groanings” (Jerusalem Bible: “in a way that could never be put into words”) — what does Paul mean? One possibility is that he is pointing to wordless, ecstatic prayer such we find in 1 Corinthians 14, but this is really not in the context in Romans. Other scholars think it is a more interior phenomenon, the presence of the Spirit who helps all believers, including those not enjoying the charismatic gifts.

Inexpressible (*alalētos*) is no doubt related to “heard things too sacred (*arrētos*) to be put into words (*rhēma*), things that a person is not permitted to speak (*laleō*): (2 Cor 12:4). For “groanings”, this is the only use in Paul. The other uses in Romans 8 have the identical word as a verb.

Paul is not at all against the mind in prayer, as we know from 1 Cor 14:15 (*ahvoe*). He knows, of course, that God is greater than our minds and hearts and perhaps here he is exploring something new for both Jews and Gentiles: silent, wordless prayer, which rightly goes beyond the rational mind to the realm of God. Cf. 1 Cor 8:2-3 above.

Verse 27 The one who searches our hearts is, of course, God. Cf. 1 Thess 2:4 above. By not being explicit, Paul forces the engagement of the listeners, who then identify this reference themselves.

“Searcher of the heart”: cf. *But the LORD said to Samuel, “Don’t be impressed by his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. God does not view things the way men do. People look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”* (1 Sam 16:7) *Examine me, and probe my thoughts! Test me, and know my concerns!* (Ps 139:23) Again, 2 Cor 2:6-10 is helpful in this context. Compare this marvellous observation: *The human spirit is like the lamp of the LORD, searching all his innermost parts.* (Prov 20:27)

Mind (or outlook) comes back again after mentions earlier: *For the outlook of the flesh is death, but the outlook of the Spirit is life and peace, because the outlook of the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to the law of God, nor is it able to do so.* (Rom 8:6-7) Here, Paul’s idea is the intention or the thinking or even the aspiration of the Spirit.

The phrase translate “according to God’s will” seems redundant — how else would the Spirit intercede? It may be better rendered “with respect to God.” One commentator put it very beautifully: “This hints at something deeper than merely praying in the way God wants or approves; God’s own life, love, and energy are involved in the process.” Precisely!

“The saints” means all Christ-believers, without distinction — an important idea in Romans. Cf. *With every prayer and petition, pray at all times in the Spirit, and to this end be alert, with all perseverance and requests for all the saints.* (Eph 6:18)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Helplessness in prayer is normal an even good—I become aware that this is not “my” project at all and true prayer is simply a constant “yes” to the Spirit within. When did I myself come to realise such giftedness, such grace?

2. Across the classical spiritual writings, there is a constant: that the Spirit is within, interceding for us. Already, then, the eternal relationship of Father, Son and Spirit is “available” to me. This does not mean prayer is effortless but that the effort lies elsewhere.

PRAYER

Father God, Your extravagant love has called us together.

Long before we even knew you, you already knew us, and had chosen us to be part of your own family— sisters and brothers with our Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

What amazing love you have shown toward us! And so we come before You with praise and thanksgiving, offering you the worship of our hearts and lives, and opening ourselves to the prompting and leading of your Holy Spirit.

Receive our worship—our praise and prayers and offerings— through the intercession of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. May the time we spend here in your presence bring honour and glory to Your Name. Amen.

You have filled your children with good hope, giving repentance for sins

Wis 12:12 *For who will say, "What have you done?" or will resist your judgment?
Who will accuse you for the destruction of nations that you made?
Or who will come before you to plead as an advocate for the unrighteous?*

13 For neither is there any god besides you, whose care is for all people, to whom you should prove that you have not judged unjustly;

14 *nor can any king or monarch confront you about those whom you have punished.*

15 *You are righteous and you rule all things righteously, deeming it alien to your power to condemn anyone who does not deserve to be punished.*

16 For your strength is the source of righteousness, and your sovereignty over all causes you to spare all.

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

18 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.

19 Through such works 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.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

What is God like? The book of Wisdom, in a long review of Israelite history, portrays God as infinite mystery, immanent in creation through Wisdom, calling us to himself and fully of graciousness and compassion.

KIND OF WRITING

The book of Wisdom has fairly clear sections:

- 1:1-6:21 The search for Wisdom
- 6:22-9:18 Solomon praises Wisdom
- 10:1-19:9 Wisdom in the OT
- 19:10-22 Conclusion

Our reading comes from that long section identifying the action of Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible. In the course of the review or *relecture* of the Biblical story from Adam to Moses, the writer pauses in 11:15-12:2 to reflect on divine mercy and takes it up again in the rest of chapter 12. Our reading crosses over two sections. The first (12:8-18) could be called "The Punishment of the Canaanites" and the second could be called "Lessons for Israel" or "The Magnanimity of God" (12:19-27).

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The Wisdom of Solomon was written at the turn of the ages, towards the end of the last century BC or early in the first century AD. The book addresses the

problem of young people being drawn away from Judaism towards the culture and cults of Hellenistic Egypt. It is a little masterpiece—beautifully written, showing that the true wisdom they seek elsewhere is to be found only in the traditions they have received. The Wisdom of Solomon was written in very good Greek, with a facility in rhetoric and deep knowledge of the philosophies and religions drawing young people away.

RELATED READINGS

But you are merciful to all, for you can do all things, and you overlook people's sins, so that they may repent. (Wisdom 11:23; cf. Ex 34:6; Ps 86:15)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 12 The verse is in the form of four rhetorical questions. The unspoken answer is "no one". In this view, God is utterly transcendent and beyond the questions of mere mortals (cf. Job). Even more so, the righteousness and justice of God—sometimes inscrutable—cannot be assailed.

Verse 13 A reflection really on the First Commandment. Cf. *I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other.* (Isaiah 45:5-6)

Verse 14 Here the writer resumes the rhetorical questions to make the justice of God clear beyond question.

Verses 15-16 Emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of God could lead to a suspicion of arbitrariness, after the example of human monarchs. But no! God's transcendence and justice are really one.

Verse 17 The power of God is manifest to all. This is especially true in two cases: in the case of those who *doubt* God and in the case of those who *ignore* God or act as if there were no God. The writer is very close here to the actual context of Jewish apostates, abandoning their faith under pressure of the culture.

Verse 18 The switch is captured sharply in the Greek: *but you*. God's absolute power and freedom are moderated by mildness and forbearance. The word for mildness is stronger in Greek, carrying the nuances of sparing or considering or even "thrif!"

Verse 19 We are invited to learn from the example of God in our own treatment of others. He gives to all the opportunity to repent.

But you are merciful to all, for you can do all things, and you overlook people's sins, so that they may *repent*. (Wisdom 11:23) But judging them little by little you gave them an opportunity to *repent* (Wisdom 12:10) The final message vis-à-vis the inhabitants of the land is fairly blunt in v. 22.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The reading presents an opportunity to reflect on the otherness and sovereignty of God. Speaking of the Trinity, the pseudo-Denis writes in his *Mystical Theology*: "outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their Darkness."
2. At the same time, the writer offers a clear picture of God's compassion and forbearance, giving us every opportunity to respond. We really are the weeds of the Gospel, but not to be uprooted without the chance of becoming wheat.
3. It would help to make these reflections quite personal. When have I known God's patience towards myself?

PRAYER

O God, always greater than our hearts, always higher than our thoughts, we stand before you in silent awe. Draw us ever more into your divine life, as we are in your image and likeness. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Wisdom 12:13,16-19; Psalm 86 (85); Romans 8:26-27; Matthew 13:24-43

READINGS 1 AND 3

The mildness, forbearance and patience of God make the link with the Gospel. Note especially the last words of the reading: and you have filled your children with good hope, because you give repentance for sins. (Wisdom 12:19)

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Ps 86 (85) makes for a great response to the reading. Notice the final verse: But you, God of mercy and compassion, slow to anger, O Lord, abounding in love and truth, turn and take pity on me.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Wisdom 12:13,16-19

Today's first reading is a meditation—quite philosophical—on what God is like. As you listen, see if it resonates with your own experience of God as compassionate mystery and as patient creator. Both the power of God and God's mercy come to expression here.

Second reading

Romans 8:26-27

There are only two sentences in this remembered and loved reading from Romans chapter 8. Paul can say a tremendous amount in very few words and yet speak to the experience of believers or any time or place.

Gospel

Matthew 13:24-43

Today we hear yet another parable of the kingdom from Matthew, a parable it is easy to underestimate. At the time of writing, some in the church wanted to purify it by getting rid of the unworthy members—a temptation at any age.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 20 July

St Apollinaris, bishop

Micah 6:1-4, 6-8

Nature is called a witness against Israel and then Israel must ask, What does God want to me? The answer in the last line is clear, succinct and challenging.

Matthew 12:38-42

An innocent-sounding request leads to a very stern judgment. Why? Because what is required is faith not proof. Jesus turns on his enquirers and offers a mysterious sign, that of Jonah, a story often taken in early Christianity as a symbol of the resurrection. The two added sayings insist that some "greater" is here... just how much greater is clear precisely from the resurrection.

Tuesday 21 July

St Laurence of Brindisi, priest and doctor

Micah 7:14-15, 18-20

This is a prayer to God as our shepherd, a very beautiful prayer which gradually unfolds the identity of God. As we call on God to be faithful, we commit ourselves too to be faithful to our faithful God.

Matthew 12:46-50

This story can still surprise and shock. Why did Jesus show more regard to his family and especially to his own mother? Partly because the Kingdom creates a new set of relationships, a new family, touching us even more deeply

Wednesday 22 July

St Mary Magdalen, feast

Mary Magdalen, Mary of Bethany, the sinful woman and the Samaritan woman are all distinct individuals and are not to be confused or conflated. Mary of Magdala is a key witness to the resurrection of Jesus.

Song of Songs 3:1-4

The Song of Songs unfolds as a series of love poems, serious and playful. These include what we may call quest stories or reflections on seeking the beloved. Our reading, beautiful in itself, makes for a great introduction to today's Gospel.

John 20:1-2, 11-18

The Fourth Gospel has many "quest" stories, none more powerful than the quest of Mary Magdalen for the risen Lord. The words used mark a significant shift in this Gospel. The opening question of Jesus in this Gospel—"What are you looking for?" (John 1:38)—becomes "Whom are you looking for?" (John 20:15) We proclaim a *person* and not simply a doctrine.

Thursday 23 July

St Bridget of Sweden, patroness of Europe

Gal 2:19-20

The reading is special for the feast. It is only two sentences, but two very remarkable sentences. A more arresting (and more accurate) translation may be found in the NET Bible: *I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* (Galatians 2:20)

John 15:1-8

The image of the vine—rich in reference in the OT and Jesus' parables, it taken up again in a personal way. Jesus himself is the vine and we the branches.

Friday 24 July

*St Charbel Makhlouf, priest and hermit;
St Declan, bishop*

Jeremiah 3:14-17

At the time of Jeremiah, the religious leadership had failed and so the prophet speaks God's promise of fidelity.

Matthew 13:18-23

As you hear the parable, try to listen without the "explanation" and see what it says to you. The first level of meaning is really the abundance and sheer "unstoppability" of the kingdom.

Saturday 25 July

St James the Apostle

2 Corinthians 4:7-15

The reading is special for the feast. The Corinthians blew cold and hot when it came to St Paul. Once more, in this reading he defends himself, and reveals something of the inner motivation, the inner person, his sense of apostleship.

Matthew 20:20-28

Again especially chosen for the feast, this reading tells a familiar and instructive tale with one interesting difference. In Mark, it is James and John who make the blunder. In Matthew, to spare the blushes of the emerging leadership, this "role" is assigned to their mother! In any case, the message is untouched: leadership in the faith community is costly service, modelled on Jesus' own service.

