



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (19th July) 2026

Darnel - the plant sown amidst the wheat in the Gospel reading this morning - is described somewhere as a noxious plant and toxic to human beings. The dangers of it growing amidst the wheat are evident; and what is more, it would consume nutrients that would otherwise further strengthen the crop being cultivated. So it is that the servants ask whether they should uproot the darnel; but the farmer says not. The weeds and the wheat can be separated at the time of the harvest. The suggestion that the weeds will be burnt underlines the interpretation of the story as referring to the Last Judgement, as we call it.

However, there is more to the parable than merely a reference to what is to come, because it tells also something of the situation of the Church in the life of this world: namely that the earthly institution of the Church comprises a mix of those whose presence furthers the divine Purpose and others, who do not - even, sometimes, impeding its progress.

Of course, in the life of this world, the situation is rarely as clearly cut - to use a clever pun in the present context - as the scenario outlined in the parable. The ecclesiastical field is dotted around with all sorts of plants. These, like the darnel, can seem to be weeds spoiling the cultivation; but we should be careful to remember that weeds are often described as flowers growing where we do not want them; and this might give us pause for thought as we reflect on the significance of the Gospel.

Recent decades have brought to consciousness what, probably, former generations knew intuitively: that a healthy eco-system requires bio-diversity; the natural order cannot survive on a streamlined catalogue of constituent parts; even the rather less appealing features often - maybe usually - play an indispensable part in the health of the whole.

Something similar is true of the life of the Church. We might be able to identify elements of darnel - elements, which are unquestionably harmful; but much more often it is a question of weeds in the sense of flowers where we do not want them to be. Like a natural eco-system, the life of the Church - even a smallish Christian community - relies on a fairly complex interaction of participation. In some instances that participation is achieved by a role, which is bespoke to one or two people: particular tasks, which either belong to a specific office or are undertaken by someone who has the requisite skills. Equally, there are some duties, which are common to all, even if they go about them in different ways.

Two thousand years ago, Saint Paul observed that we should not envisage a congregation wherein everyone is the same, all vying to fulfil the same responsibilities, let alone imagine that only one or two areas of undertaking are the sufficient substance of ecclesiastical life.

Sometimes we might struggle to see what some people could bring to the life of our Christian community or we might be fearful of them disturbing the status quo; but there are at least two reasons why we should be careful. First, whilst it might not be presently clear what part they could play, we might arrive at a moment when their presence comes into its own. Alternatively, our inability to see a role for them reflects an inability or unwillingness to appreciate the advantage their presence represents - we might even say a failure to make use of the gifts that God has sent us: the fact that we cannot see that we need them does not mean that we do not.

Of course, there are times when people do constitute a threat either to the mission of the Church or members of a Christian community - the darnel of the parable. In such circumstances, we must be able to contain the potential peril they represent; but we need also to reflect carefully on why we have come to such a judgement.