

Several months ago, probably during Advent or Lent, I spoke about heroes and villains and afterwards a boy and his dad came up to me and the boy said, “But, Father Brent, I like Darth Vader.” So do I. A lot. So does that mean that kid and I are dark lords of the sith, mass-murdering wannabe’s? If the original Star Wars movie is the only one you’ve seen, then, yes, we are pretty messed up. In order to understand why anyone would like Darth Vader, we have to know the whole story, beginning, middle, and especially the end. His story is the story of a very good man, who out of fear, placed his trust in the wrong person, fell into great evil, and then was redeemed. Many other characters in popular culture have similar arcs—we don’t know whether they are heroes or villains until the end of the story, which is one of the lessons we can take from the three parables we heard in today’s gospel.

The parable of the weeds in the field has its basis in the real life scenario in which an enemy would sow a poisonous weed called darnel among his neighbor’s wheat crop. Darnel is a mimic weed, also known as false wheat. It was very difficult to distinguish between the good and bad plants until harvest time. And then they could be separated and the darnel would be burned. Jesus used that in his explanation showing how the wicked will be separated from the righteous and God’s justice will be done. One immediate lesson for us to remember: it is God’s justice; God is the judge, not us. We do not know what is in another person’s heart.

Jesus wasn’t giving lessons in agricultural practices. He was referring to the kingdom of heaven which is made up of people, not grasses. When a poisonous darnel seed is planted, it grows darnel; when a wheat seed is planted it grows wheat—those species cannot change from one species to another. That is not the case with us.

Saint Isidore of Pelusium—a 5th century Egyptian monk and priest—offered this understanding of the parable of the weeds: sinners, represented by the weeds, must not be immediately pulled up and burned in order to give them time to repent. Isidore offered a “what-if” reflection to go along with that. He specifically identified three sinners who were spared immediate death: Matthew the tax collector, Peter the denier of Jesus, and Saul the persecutor of the Church to whom Jesus said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting ME?” What if? No gospel of Matthew. No Peter to lead the church. No Paul to be the apostle to the gentiles. Fortunately for us, God was patient and gave them time to repent. The sin is not the end of the story; the end of the story is the end of the story and a lot can happen between the sin and the end.

Those three men had very dramatic encounters with Jesus himself. For the vast majority of sinners—all of us—the Lord works in more subtle ways which is where the other two parables come in. The mustard seed is tiny but it grows into a large bush. The birds of the sky resting in its branches has been understood as a sign of the universality of the Kingdom of Heaven which started in a very small and humble way. How does the kingdom expand? The yeast. A little bit of yeast raises up the entire batch of dough. True disciples of Christ work as leavening agents in the societies in which they live. They raise it up. It is through that leavening action—the influence of relatively good and decent people upon those who for a time may be less so—that even the hardest sinners can be converted. God gives us time to return to him and it will be only the hardest of hearts, the most unrepentant of sinners who will be denied entry in His eternal kingdom.

The combination of the parables of the weeds in the field, the mustard seed, and the leaven show us that while God's justice will be done in the end, he patiently waits for us to return to him so that we in turn can help lead others to him. There is another implication to this. I will refer here to another quote, this one from the wizard Gandalf in the Lord of the Rings. When the hobbit Frodo said, "I wish Bilbo had killed Gollum," Gandalf replied, "there are many who live who deserve death but there are also many who have died who deserve life. Can you give it to them, Frodo? Do not be so quick to deal out death and punishment. For good or ill, I sense that Gollum still has a role yet to play." God is willing to give us time to repent so he can forgive us, should we not also be patient with each other? "Father, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"...does that sound familiar? How often do we sit in judgement of others who appear to be evil, maybe even desiring serious harm come to them, maybe even their deaths? If God can be patient and forgiving with us, perhaps we should try praying that he will help us to be more patient and forgiving to each other. God is just but he is also patient, merciful, and forgiving. When Jesus told us to put on his yoke a few weeks ago, he was telling us to learn to see things through his eyes and follow in his footsteps. May we learn from him to let God be the judge while we practice patience and forgiveness.