

Homily: July 19-20, 2008

It doesn't take a "rocket scientist" to figure out that Jesus' last parable in our gospel today is about the "final judgment". I kept reflecting on times in my life that I would call "almost meeting your maker moments." The one that kept popping into my memory was about a snake. In Viet Nam they had a deadly poisonous snake called a "Bamboo Viper". The story goes that if you are bitten you take two steps and you are dead. I cannot vouch for the veracity of that, but everyone believed it and I did not want to test the viper to find out. My Marine Infantry Company was on an artillery firebase in the Ashau Valley. Our job was to provide security for the artillery battery that was providing support for the other three infantry companies in the battalion. We had been there a couple of days so I had dug a pretty deep foxhole. Our squad had been on a long patrol around the base and had just come through the wire. Thankfully, I had developed the habit of looking in my foxhole before jumping in. Sure enough there was the Bamboo Viper down in the hole. It was not a large snake but had a distinct "bright green" color. At any rate, I passed word down the line what I was going to do and dispatched the Viper with my M-16. That was probably overkill, but I wanted to be sure. Let's see if we can tie this together with today's readings.

Today's selection from Matthew 13 continues Jesus' Parables Discourse. It contains two short parables—about a mustard seed and yeast—and a long parable with an allegorical interpretation—about the wheat and the weeds. All three parables explicitly propose to tell us what the kingdom of God (or heaven, as Matthew prefers) is "like".

In the parable of the mustard seed the primary point of comparison is the contrast between the smallness of the seed and the greatness of the result ("the largest of plants.") The kingdom of God in its fullness will be like that great shrub, despite its small beginnings in the present. Those small beginnings are Jesus' preaching and his miraculous actions, all in the service of God's kingdom. The process of growth remains somewhat mysterious; it is in God's hands. In the parable of the yeast the primary point of comparison is again the contrast between the small amount of yeast and the large batch of bread that

its mysterious action can produce. And again the small beginnings (in Jesus' ministry) will produce great results.

The longer parable of the wheat and the weeds resembles last Sunday's parable of the sower in form and content. It comes with an allegorical interpretation and deals with the mixed reception given to Jesus and his teaching about God's kingdom.

When a householder is informed by his servants that both wheat and weeds are growing in his fields, he instructs them to wait until the whole crop is fully grown; only then will he separate the good wheat from the noxious weeds. While this parable also contrasts small beginnings and great results, it reminds us that it is God's prerogative to bring about the fullness of the kingdom, and that God will do so in God's own way and time. Moreover, it stresses the idea of hostility and opposition to God's kingdom in the present, and develops the theme of the final judgment (or harvest) when God will separate the good from the bad. The allegorical explanation appended to the parable develops an apocalyptic scenario that makes even more explicit what is already in the parable.

As followers of Jesus we look forward in hope to the fullness of God's kingdom, and so we pray, "Thy kingdom come." We also believe that through our baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection (the paschal mystery) we have received the "first fruits of the Spirit." This Sunday's excerpt from Paul's instruction about life in the Spirit in Romans 8 concerns prayer, a major element in any Christian spirituality. Paul boldly expresses the frustration that all serious religious persons feel from time to time: "We do not know how to pray as we ought." But more important, Paul also reminds us that in our prayer the Holy Spirit is present to help us express what we really want to say to God and to ensure that our heavenly Father understands what we want to say in our prayer. This is a most encouraging biblical insight about prayer.

You know we all have had close calls in our lives where a step in the other direction or a left turn instead of a right may have caused us enormous harm or death.

The "Bamboo Viper" is like the mustard seed or yeast in that it is small in size but can produce great results although with tragic consequences in the Viper's case.

At home the weeds have taken over our onions in the garden. We were gone for a few days and now I can't tell which is what. I need to pull both in order to find the onions!

I guess the question we need to ask ourselves before we do “check out- of- here” and make it to our final judgment is this, “Are you the “good wheat” or a “noxious weed?”