

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Jul 26th 2014

Today is the feast of Sts. Joachim and Anne, the parents of the Virgin Mary. It is also the birthday of one of my daughters, named Annabelle in part to reflect this feast. So today is an important day for my Christian and biological families! While the Bible itself is silent on Mary's familial roots, there is an old Christian tradition that recounts Joachim and Anne presenting the young Mary in the Temple. This tradition reminds us that Mary was first and foremost a daughter of Israel, knowing by heart the Psalmist's memorable words that "better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere."

And yet, as Jeremiah reminds us in today's first reading, the "thousand elsewhere" surely matter. Here we see Jeremiah in true prophetic mode, given the unenviable task of "greeting" Temple visitors with a promise of judgment and an exhortation to reform. Jeremiah will not allow Temple worshipers to "compartmentalize their lives," separating spiritual worship from ethical action. No, true obedience to God entails right action towards one neighbor...especially the marginalized orphans, widows, and resident aliens in our midst. Without this reconciliation of worship and ethics, the "dwelling place of the Lord, the mighty God" becomes a "den of thieves." One sees here an unmistakable connection between Jeremiah and Mary's own son Jesus, a prophet whose "jeremiad" against Temple merchants led directly to his death.

And yet today's gospel parable cautions the church against being too quick to separate the "weeds" from the "wheat." We are called to reform our lives, but final judgment belongs to God, not us. In fact, the "weeds" and the "wheat" are so inextricably interwoven...and our "gardening skills" of discernment so limited...that attempting to extirpate the weeds will inevitably lead to the destruction of the wheat as well.

But if final judgment lies in God's hands, the promise of judgment remains. Judgment is not the most popular of theological themes in the 21st century, an era that prefers a God of therapeutic affirmation. But as Mary learned, election offers not an escape from life but a deeper responsibility for life. With Jeremiah, Mary, Joachim, Anne and the Psalmist, may "my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God," both in the sanctuaries of our churches and in the streets of our world.

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