

COMPASSION

What are we supposed to do with the faults and failings we begin to recognize in ourselves during our silent prayer – our jealousy, say, our impatience, our tendency to judge? Silence gives us the confidence to look at the shadow side of our lives, and the parable of the wheat and the darnel in Matthew's Gospel helps to answer this question.

The field of our lives yields both weeds and healthy crops, good qualities and bad; darnel springs up among the wheat. If we follow the advice in the Gospel we would not be eager to root out the weeds. Jesus says, 'Let them grow' (Matthew 13:30).

If we can live with our faults, and not take a sledge-hammer to them, they can be of use to us. If we do not recoil and run away from them, if we can let them be, then we can learn a great deal.

'Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate,' Jesus told the crowds. 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven' (Luke 6:36 – 38). How important is it to look on ourselves, as well as others, with such compassion.

When, instead of hating myself for my faults, I learn to be compassionate towards my own weaknesses, then I will learn to be more understanding of the weaknesses of others. The more intolerant I am of my own failures and faults, the more intolerant I will be of other people's failings.

This is not a licence to be indifferent to our own faults, to be self-indulgent, to behave just as we like. No. It is a way of treating our weaknesses not with severity and hatred, but seeing them as aids, to teach us patience and compassion, tolerance and understanding. If I can learn this balance, if I can hold the goodness and weakness of my life in this way, then my relationships with others will flourish.

Being too severe with our weaknesses leaves us feeling guilty, with a low sense of our worth. And that means we are no good to others. It leaves us paralysed. So much good is left undone, not because of lack of goodwill but because we feel unworthy, useless.

The kingdom of God is about building relationships – a healthy relationship with ourselves first, then healthy relationships with others and so with God. If I can be compassionate towards my own failings, as he is compassionate, then this tolerance and understanding will naturally flow towards others. I shall become a compassionate person. I shall be building his kingdom.

God knows our faults and he loves us. He will take care of them. It is not the weeds in our lives that God is interested in. He is interested in the wheat, which he will gather into his barn. Our weeds he will tie in bundles and throw into the fire.

'Do not abandon your gifts,' Augustine prayed. 'Do not desert the field in which you have sown the seed, until your harvest is stored in the heavenly barn.'

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