

A homily for July 20, 2008, St. Ignatius Church, 16th Sunday (A).
Fr. Joseph T. Nolan.

The church allows a short version of this gospel, not because it is a summer day! No – for some reason the evangelist put together no less than three parables and an allegory. What you just heard is what Jesus said. The rest is an attempt to figure out what happens to evil people, the weeds in the parable which are bundled up to be burned. That stirred the imagination, and the writers came up with the fires of hell. A more likely explanation is that the evil IN US is somehow removed before we enter heaven. That may be an argument for purgatory, an intermediate state between death and eternal life. But not a state of punishment; rather, of purification. The church invented purgatory in the medieval period because it seemed to answer a human need. It also invented Limbo and, as you know, dropped that idea only recently. So where are we?

With nothing less than Jesus' promise of eternal life. And the simple statement he made when he bought back from death the little girl. He said, "**With God there is no death.**" Other translations put it, "**With God all are alive.**"

And what is that like? All we are told today in the parable is that we are wheat gathered into the barn—not a flattering image of heaven! We should give more thought to heaven if it is to be our permanent home. And some have. An excellent scholar, Jeffrey Burton Russell, has written a book called *A History of Heaven*. It's not for light reading! And it's not really a history because it stops with Dante's great poem, the *Divine Comedy*. He stopped there because no one has ever equaled Dante in describing the indescribable, the ultimate Mystery, God and blessedness. The *Divine Comedy* is poetry, and Dante uses many metaphors. Sublime music and great poetry are best in dealing with mystery. The final chapters on heaven—*paradiso*—are worth anyone's meditation. His effort to draw near and see what the medieval theologians called the Beatific Vision can be summed up (perhaps) in two words: *Light*, and *Love*. One is enlightened to take in God's radiance. Or, as we commonly say, to see God. And he uses symbols like the rose, "the celestial Rose, alive, bright, opening always more and more to light and love." His companion now is no longer Beatrice, his earthly love transformed by heaven, but St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who represents contemplation, the grasping of truth.

He describes God with words that are often quoted: "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars." Yes, and the Love that willed to create us, which loves us first, before even we have responded to that love. Plato, who discovered his way to God through philosophy, thought of the Ultimate in terms of Beauty. But Love remains the major Christian revelation of what God is.

Dante's great vision is far beyond the gospel image of wheat—good seed—being gathered into barns! But parables are meant to make us think, to follow a line of thought. Heaven is not a barn. Heaven is where God is, and that's why heaven, life with God, eternal life, does indeed begin on earth. When? Whenever we know and participate in the good and true and beautiful. Whenever we love, and are loved.

It intrigues us that Jesus compares us to wheat. He was once at a supper table, and took bread made from wheat and said, "This is my body." And here we are, doing the same thing. We even say that, with him – and in him, through him – we give glory to God. There is a verse by an Irish poet that gives voice to a seed, perhaps of wheat. This is what the seed, the kernel says

**Still surmounting as I came
wind and water, frost and flame
from the burial place of seed
from the earth's maternal bosom
through the root and stem and blossom
to supply thy present need
have I journeyed here.**

Yes. Now we journey here, to offer the bread, and receive it back, Christ's body. We enter into communion with him. And try to live that way.