

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time – C

In today's Gospel, Jesus is passing "through towns and villages" on his way to Jerusalem, when someone sees his opportunity to ask Jesus a pressing question: "Lord, will only a few people be saved?" I think many of us would think that is a pretty good question, and perhaps we have wondered the same thing ourselves. Of course, Jesus did not give a direct answer – that is not usually his way. Perhaps we would prefer a very direct, specific answer to this and other questions. But would that really be helpful to us? Maybe it would satisfy our curiosity momentarily, but no doubt it would lead to other questions. And Jesus, of course, is most interested in what is best for us spiritually, rather than trying to satisfy our curiosity or just passing on information.

No doubt Jesus knew that when he was asked if only a few people would be saved, it would not be helpful if he answered with a simple "yes" or "no". Nor would it be spiritually helpful to anyone if

he were to answer this question by giving numbers or percentages, as in, for example: “Two-thirds of all people will be saved,” or, “The number of people who will be saved equals 10%.” This would only make us more anxious and lead to more stress.

How would we answer this question, or a similar one, such as, how many people will be saved? Naturally there have been different ways that people including theologians have answered it. The Puritans back in the days of the Thirteen Colonies would have answered that hardly anyone would be saved. But Jesus of course did not say that. Nowadays, we might hear other responses as well, such as: everyone will be saved. Everyone goes to heaven. However, Jesus did not say that either. In fact, his response in today’s Gospel makes it clear that we should not assume that everyone will be saved. And elsewhere in the Gospels he makes it clear that hell is real.

Again, in replying to this question, Jesus is not trying to give information; rather, he desires to teach us something for our

spiritual benefit. And he wants to teach us precisely because he desires our salvation. So he doesn't give a straight answer but he knows that that would not help us, but rather, as he so often does, he responds with a parable. I would like to highlight Jesus' words, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many ... will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough." So Jesus wants us to understand that our salvation is something we have to strive for.

Now I have to be very careful here, because what I am not saying is that we have to earn our salvation. Church teaching is very clear that we cannot earn our salvation: rather, it is a gift, freely given by God to us. It is only through Jesus' death and resurrection that we are saved. If Jesus did not come to save us, then none of us would be saved. So we ought to give thanks to the Lord every day for the gift of salvation that he has won for us. But I am also not saying that all we have to do to be saved is to have faith that Jesus died for our sins. Yes, we must believe this, and we must have faith in Jesus

Christ, but then our faith has to transform how we live our lives; it has to change us, or rather, we have to let it change us. We have to conform ourselves to Christ; we have to conform our will to God's will. We cannot enter heaven on our own terms, but rather on God's terms.

When Jesus tells us to strive to enter through the narrow gate, that means that effort is required of us, that we have work to do. The Church has understood this to mean that God freely gives us his grace – we cannot earn it or merit – but that we must then cooperate with his grace. And that is where the “striving” comes in. God gives us his grace, but we must dispose ourselves to be open to it and we must respond to it. And God has given us the means to respond to his grace.

One of these means is of course prayer. There is no short cut to this. Prayer is how we communicate with God and how he communicates with us. Prayer is also acknowledging God's loving

presence; that He is in our midst. If we never pray, how can we receive the grace God desires to give us let alone respond to it or cooperate with it? How can we grow in our relationship with God? People who do not communicate with one another nor acknowledge each other's presence cannot really be said to have a real relationship, certainly not a positive or healthy one.

And another means is by coming to Mass, as you are all doing today, and by receiving the sacraments. The Mass is the primary form of worship that God has given us and so, why would not we not want to worship Him in the way that He desires and in the way that He has given to us? After all, Jesus did say, "Do this in remembrance of me." And God has also given us the sacraments as the primary – certainly not the only – but as the primary means of dispensing his grace to us. Why would we not want to receive these gifts? Baptism and confirmation of course are sacraments that we only receive once. Other sacraments we receive only infrequently and are of

course not even for all people – for example, marriage and holy orders. But the Eucharist and reconciliation are two sacraments that we can and should receive many times throughout our lives. Again, these are gifts God desires to give us, for our own spiritual good, so why not avail ourselves of them?

And the sacrament of reconciliation in particular leads me to another way in which we ought to “strive to enter through the narrow gate”. What Jesus calls us to, again and again, is repentance. Or, put another way, to conversion or a change of heart. Repentance can be thought of simply as turning away from what leads us away from God and instead turning back towards God. It means putting away those things that are sources of temptation for us, situations that we know will lead us into sin. It means renouncing the vices that give us the illusion of happiness but only lead to sorrow: that is, selfishness, pride, lust, greed, and so on. God knows that repentance is not a one-time-only thing; He knows that we are

weak, especially when we first begin to follow Him, but even throughout our whole lives. After all, we live in a world in which sin and temptation are abundant. We have all been affected by original sin and the sin in the world. The striving that Jesus talks about in our Gospel today means daily conversion of heart, choosing each day to turn to the Lord and trying to follow Him and His will, even when it means so no to ourselves. But because He knows of our human weakness, He gives us sacraments such as the Eucharist and Reconciliation to strengthen us and to reconcile us to Him when we have fallen short.

But we must not look at the Eucharist and Reconciliation as magic – receiving communion or going to confession without any preparation beforehand and no change in our lives afterwards. Again, we have to strive – we have to dispose ourselves or open ourselves to God's grace. And again: through prayer, through a

conscious decision to do our best, and yes, through works of charity and mercy.

It's kind of like trying to stay physically healthy. We do that through exercise, good diet, getting enough sleep, etc., and it's an ongoing process or cycle. Day in and day out, we keep doing it. Or we might have a bad day – no exercise, junk food, not enough sleep – and then we have a choice: tomorrow I can keep doing the bad things; I might feel good in the moment, but over time my health will deteriorate and I will feel worse and worse. Or tomorrow, I can resume exercising, eat better, turn off the screens and go to bed a little earlier. And then I will start to notice improvements.

Let's respond to the Lord's challenge to us in today's Gospel by humbly asking Him for His grace, the grace we need to keep following Him, despite the temptations in the world around us and despite our own human weakness. Let's repent of anything within

us that is not of God and resolve to keep following Him so that we might enter through the narrow gate.

- **August 24, 2025 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**