

## 21st Sunday of the Year, Year C

In today's gospel, Jesus is asked whether only a few would be saved. The language of salvation comes from everyday experience. Whenever there is a terrible accident or natural disaster we set in motion a rescue operation with the hope of saving as many people as possible. Will only a few be saved? The question in the gospel is asked not in relation to a natural disaster. It is about the ultimate meaning of life. Many of Jesus' contemporaries seemed to be lost. Their lives were in tatters. So many of them hadn't found love worthy of the name. They couldn't see where they were going. Nothing added up. There didn't seem much point to it all. Then along came Jesus with a wonderful message of life and love and freedom. However, most didn't know what he was on about, or they were persuaded by their leaders to look on him as a religious quack. Our questioner wants to know whether many people are going to grasp what Jesus is revealing and experience the freedom and the wonder he promises, or are most going to stay on a road that is going nowhere and never find their soul.

The question is an ultimate one about life itself. If we don't find any meaning here, there is no reason to think that the fact of dying will work magic. We can expect to die as we live and if we lose our soul now, the chances are that it will remain lost in the existence on the other side of death. Jesus' answer is, as we would expect, full of hope. He hasn't come for a remnant or a select few. He has come to draw everyone without exception to God. Jesus often imagined life as a love feast, a marriage banquet - and so he replies: 'Many will come from east and west and north and south to take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God'.

However, Jesus is not interested in theoretical questions such as he has been asked or in idle speculation. So, before replying, he tells the person asking the question: 'Try your best to enter by the narrow door'. In a sense every path is a narrow one, for to decide to go in one direction is to decide against every other direction. To take one path is to decide not to take other paths. To follow Jesus means to let a lot go and to leave a lot behind. It is the same with every life-decision. Achievements of every kind, and especially in the area of love, are the fruit of commitment. The life of the soul is not handed to us on a plate and we can't find it by just waiting for it.

However, while the path is narrow and demanding, let us not forget that it is as wide as the arms of Jesus stretched out on the cross. It is a path of love, and while it will constantly make demands upon us, we will experience a full life in which we will laugh all our laughter and weep all our tears. The saints tell us that it is certainly worth choosing and Jesus himself tells us that to gain the whole world is nothing if we lose our soul. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews in today's Second Reading tells us to expect pain if we are going to run the race, but not to be disheartened. The prize is worth all the effort we put into the race.

The Responsorial Psalm sets the mood of the Mass and it is one of exultant joy. It is the shortest psalm in the Bible. The people of Israel, assembled in the temple, are asking all nations to praise God. What God has done for the people of Israel, he wants to do for the whole world (see First Reading). This is at the heart of the Catholic dream. Since every single person in this world is created by the one God, and since it is the same Spirit who breathes life into every one of us, and since Jesus came to draw everyone to himself (John 12:32), the Catechism, quoting from Pope Paul VI and from the Vatican Council, reminds us that it is God's desire that everyone be

united to Jesus in the one community of faith: 'The Church 'is the visible plan of God's love for humanity'[Paul VI, June 22,1973], because God desires 'that the whole human race may become one People of God, form one Body of Christ, and be built up into one temple of the Holy Spirit'(Decree on the Church's missionary activity 7§2, Catholic Catechism n.776). 'The Church is the place where humanity must rediscover its unity and salvation'(Catechism n.845).

This has been the dream that has inspired missionaries throughout the 2000 years of the Church's life, and we are still being challenged to become aware of the missionary dimension of our faith. As the Catechism says: 'The ultimate purpose of mission is none other than to make people share in the communion between the Father and the Son in their Spirit of love' (Catechism n. 850).

Because God is love, we know that his Spirit will reach out to everyone even if they never hear the good news about Jesus or come to know the beauty of God as revealed by Jesus (Catechism n. 847-848), but that does not in any way lessen our desire to tell people and to invite them to know Jesus and to experience the fullness of his life as members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church where they can experience a family that has no boundaries and is open to the whole world.

Of course this Catholic Church to which we belong is filled with very imperfect people like us. Only the saints are in full communion with the Church. But we are here and we want to receive all the grace that Jesus pours out upon us through the Church. We want to learn to respond with all our heart and mind and soul and strength. We are weighed down by sin and we have a lot to learn from others. But we are in a very graced place. The Catechism tells us: 'The Church is catholic: she proclaims the fullness of faith. She bears in herself and administers the totality of the means of salvation. She is sent out to all peoples. She speaks to all. She encompasses all times. She is 'missionary of her very nature'[Vat II, AG, 2]'(Catechism n.868).

How can we be close to Jesus and enjoy the life that comes to us through the Eucharist and through the teaching and prayer of the Church without wanting to do all we can to share this life with others? If we are going to be part of Jesus' outreach to others, we must remain close to him. When Mark first describes the calling of the twelve, he tells us that Jesus called them to be with him and to be sent out to preach and heal (Mark 3:14). If we are with him, then of course we will want to go out with him sharing his mission of love. If we are reaching out to others, we must do it not on our own but with him. 'The fruitfulness of apostolate for ordained ministers as well as for lay people clearly depends on their vital union with Christ ... Charity, drawn above all from the Eucharist, is always 'as it were, the soul of the whole apostolate'[Vat II, AA, 3]'(Catechism n.864).

The risen Christ is longing to draw everyone into communion with him. He wants there to be one flock and one shepherd. If he is going to draw people in to enjoy the Eucharist which we are enjoying this morning, and to find a community that has all the richness which we have in our Catholic tradition, calling on the experience of grace and prayer that have been ours since the time of Jesus - then he wants to invite them through us. As part of our loving others as he has loved us (John 13:34), just imagine what could happen if everyone of us found one person who might just be waiting to be invited to take a further step of grace into full communion with the Catholic Church. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) provides a marvellous

opportunity for many hungry people to take steps to see whether the life we live as a parish is what they too are wanting. Why not invite them? They are free to say no, but your invitation may open a door to them and lead them towards a life that will fulfil their heart's desire.

Jesus offers everyone the way to the Father. From heaven he is drawing people all over the world to this way - the way of love. We will be saved (we will find and enjoy meaning in our lives) if we open our heart to him and follow his way. The answer to the question: 'Will there be only a few saved?' lies partly with us. Respecting people's freedom and trusting in the mysterious providence of God, we can honour the trust given us by Jesus and reach out to others in welcoming love.