

The narrow, open door to heaven

21st Sunday of the Year – Cycle C – 26 August 2007

Readings: Isa 66:18-21; Heb 12:5-7,11-13; Lk 13:22-30

“Enter by the narrow door, because many will try to enter and will not be able” (Lk)

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading, which appears towards the end of the Book of Isaiah—also called *‘Trito-Isaiah’* or *‘Third Isaiah’*—was written after the return of the people from the Babylonian Exile around 538 BC. The prophet seeks to console the exiles who have returned, sad and depressed at the sight of the destroyed temple and their desolate homelands. Through the mouth of the prophet, God reassures his people that the glory of Jerusalem will be restored and it will, once again, attract throngs of pilgrims from everywhere. God says, “I am coming to gather the nations of every language” and “they will bring all peoples from all the nations to my holy mountain.” Note the tone of universality or ‘catholicity’ since there is no longer mention of merely the Jews converging towards Jerusalem but “*all* the nations and tongues”. The last line, “I [God] will also take some of them as priests and Levites” (v.21), is significant. Hitherto, only the descendants of Aaron could be priests and only Levites could serve in the temple. But henceforth, Gentiles and others considered ‘not-so-pure’ by the Jews will serve in holy places. Similar prophecies are found elsewhere in the First Testament, especially in the Book of Isaiah, to signify the great gathering together of all peoples of the world at Zion at the beginning of the messianic age.
2. The theme of ‘catholicity’ in the sense of ‘universality’ is reiterated in the gospel reading. The question: “Lord, will only a few be saved?” prompts Jesus to caution his disciples about the exclusivist and ‘holier-than-thou’ mindsets that led pious Jews to feel that only they, and nobody else, would be saved. Rather than answer the query directly, Jesus tells his hearers that many would *not* be saved simply because they refused to accept and abide by the demands of discipleship. In other words, one would surely not gain automatic entry into heaven merely on account of one’s ethnic, racial, familial, social or religious background. Rather, one would have to be disciplined in one’s daily duties, charitable to one’s neighbour, and devoted to God in order to gain eternal life.
3. ‘Door’ is a powerful religious symbol. The entrants through the ‘narrow door’ are those who have heard God’s voice and done God’s will, difficult and dangerous though it was. Therefore, they have been found worthy of the heavenly inheritance. Those who arrive late—after the houseowner “has got up and shut the door”—are the guilty ones who tarried and did not promptly answer the Lord’s call. They will see not only their faithful forefathers—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—seated at the heavenly banquet, but, more surprisingly, those people from “east and west, from north and south” (namely, everyone whom they despised). Those “last who will be first” are the non-Jews, who immediately accepted Jesus’ offer of salvation by mending their ways and following him. Christian faith interprets these promises as being partly fulfilled in either the present entry of diverse peoples into the Church or in the future entry of all peoples into God’s Kingdom.

Linking the 2nd Reading to the Theme:

In the second reading, the author of the letter to the Hebrews strives to instill courage into the hearts of the new converts to Christianity who face persecutions. The reading suggests ‘divine disciplining’, so to say, with the community forewarned, “Suffering is part of your training. God is treating you as sons/daughters.” The second reading links the first and the third. While God desires that everyone be saved (see 1 Tim 2:4), salvation is no easygoing option, for it demands entry by what Jesus calls ‘the narrow door’. Surprisingly, those denied entry into the Master’s house in the gospel claim: “We once ate and drank in your company;” and yet, they are told: “I do not know from where you come. Away from me you wicked men!”

An Echo of the Theme is in the Psalm (117), which calls upon all nations to praise God’s name. This is cited by Paul (Rom 15:11): “O praise the Lord, all nations [Gentiles]; Extol him all peoples!” The response, “Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News,” illustrates the universal scope of God’s redemptive plan in Christ. It is therefore a fitting response to the first reading with its image of the convergence of all peoples towards Jerusalem.

Two Concerns and Challenges:

1. The Exclusivist-Inclusivist Concern: In times when many religionists tend to be exclusivist and hostile to believers of other religions, every Christian today is called to be ‘catholic’, universal and inclusivist in believing that God desires the salvation of all God’s children. Furthermore, this same God also chooses us to be co-saviours and collaborators with Christ in the divine plan of salvation.
2. The Challenge of Choice: Poet Robert Frost wrote, “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.” The ‘road less travelled’ inevitably leads to the ‘narrow door’ fraught with perils and persecutions. However, when one bears risks and dares to face difficulties, one is likely to reap a rich harvest. What will I-You choose? The narrow or the broad? Less travelled or weatherworn?

A Voice from Tradition:

St Augustine: “God who created you without you, will not save you without you.” Let’s not ask: “Lord, will only a few be saved?” but cooperate with God as co-saviors of our world.

Reflection: Most of us are not accustomed to talk about heaven and salvation. At best we casually refer to the gates of heaven as ‘pearly gates’ (see Rev 21:21). But let’s remember that these gates are only attainable like that ‘pearl of great price’ – paying with everything that one has! In other words, when Jesus speaks of ‘narrow door’ he wants his disciples to tread the road less traveled.

In Lighter Vein: A man newly admitted into heaven was being shown around by St Peter, who pointed out to the many groups residing there. “They’re the Jews ... and those there are the Protestants ... and those are Hindus ... and Muslims.” After a while they arrived at an enclave surrounded by a high wall. From inside came voices of laughter and singing. “Who are they?” asked the new arrival. “Hush!” said Peter, “They’re the Catholics – and they think they’re the only ones in heaven.” Jesus says: “Men and women from the east and west, from north and south, will come to take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.” I hope to earn my seat there!
