

21st Sunday of Ordinary Time C (Is 66:18-21; Heb 12:5-7, 11-13; Lk 13:22-30) By John H. Howard, C.J.M

In this Gospel passage we find Luke's familiar theme of the journey: **"Jesus passed through towns and villages, teaching as he went making his way to Jerusalem"** (Lk 13:22). As Jesus journeys from Galilee to Jerusalem to fulfill his ultimate mission, his audience is also on a spiritual journey. They are following this prophet to find a better path to God. We are all on a spiritual journey. And who doesn't have questions at time, such as wondering if we are on the right path? Or, as **"Someone asked him, 'Lord, will only a few people be saved?'"** (Lk 12:23).

It was a well debated question then as it is now. The questioner was certainly assuming that if few were chosen they would come from the people of Israel. Among the Jewish people of the time there were various sects just as among Christians today. Many of you have probably been told by a member of an Evangelical sect that you would not be saved unless you belong to their group. (By the way, if someone tells you that don't discuss with them. One cannot discuss a dogma or an ideology; one accepts it or rejects it. Those are closed beliefs systems which have nothing to do with logic. Just tell the person **"I'll pray for you."**) The same phenomenon existed in Jesus' time. Some small Jewish sects believed they were the only ones who would be saved. Among them were the Pharisees who numbered only a few thousands. Another sect was the Essenes, the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls, who were even fewer. When it came to people outside of their nation, the gentiles, they were not even considered for salvation. It is not exactly in line with what we read today in Isaiah and in today's Gospel. In Isaiah we read: **"I come to gather nations of every language...Some of these I will take as priests and Levites, says the Lord"** (Is 66:18, 21). God is fortunately more opened minded than his people.

It is interesting to note that Jesus did not answer the question posed to him. Instead he used two brief parables about doors: the narrow door and the locked door. In these parables Jesus is saying it doesn't matter who one is, as much as what one does. It is not what one professes to be that matters but what one is doing in the end. We are reminded of the parable of the two brothers whom the father asked to go to his fields. One says yes but didn't go; the other says no but ended up going (Mt 21:28-32). What counted? The yes or the action?

Jesus goes even further than Isaiah; he says the gentiles will be admitted while those originally chosen will be left out: **"And people will come from the east and the west and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God. For some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last"** (Lk 13:29-30). Such a statement must have totally shocked his audience who saw belonging to the Chosen People as a seal of superiority and a

guarantee of salvation. By this statement Jesus is not rejecting Israel but warning all those who claim to serve God that actions speak louder than words.

What Jesus was saying to Israel he is saying as well to his Church. The Lord is telling us that the privilege of being his disciples only guarantees us a head start; it not an automatic ticket to heaven. He warns us in Luke that privilege should not engender pride but responsibility: **"From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more"** (12:48).

As he keeps heading toward Jerusalem Jesus himself is assuming the responsibility of his mission. He is definitely taking the narrow door not the easy way out. He warns us that it is not enough to know him; in the end he will recognize only those who walked with him. **"We ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets"** (Lk 13:27) he says, doesn't cut it. Twice he says: **"I don't know where you are from"** (Lk 13: 25, 27). I once ate next to Mother Teresa but that doesn't make me a saint.

In some periods of the History of the Church many interpreted the image of the narrow door as a need for self imposed penance for their sins. The fear of not being saved drove people to wear hair shirts that would irritate their skin all day. Some whipped themselves, deprived themselves of sleep to pray, fasted more than it was health or exposed themselves to the elements as penances. In the Middle-Ages the monasteries were full because people were fearful of damnation. Such practices reflected the hard times in which they lived. Very few had a good life so they assumed eternal life was the same, few would get it unless one did serious penance.

Jesus however taught us to believe in a loving God who is not out to get us. He presents him as the loving father of a prodigal son who waits every day for his return. It is not the angry master looking for a reason to punish. When the son finally returns, the father embraces him and prepares a feast for him which the son doesn't deserve (Lk 15:11-32). The true fear of the Lord is **"awe"** as in **"awesome God,"** not fear of punishment. We need to work at being disciplined without inventing unhealthy mortification of the flesh. There are enough hardships coming our way in life without looking for trouble. Holding back our uncharitable judgments, doing good for those we don't like and praying for those who hurt us is much more difficult than not eating candy.

On our spiritual journey we can take the advice given in the second reading from the letter to the Hebrews: **"So strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees. Make straight paths for your feet, that what is lame may not be disjoined but healed"** (Heb 12: 12-13). Don't give up, there is light at the end.