

Sunday, August 25, 2013

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

Conventual Mass

Enter Through the Narrow Gate

It is with urgency that Jesus traveled the length and breadth of the Holy Land proclaiming that “The kingdom is at hand.” It is with the same pressing insistence that that message reaches us today. Our destiny and that of the whole human race depends on how well we pay attention to it.

The teachings of the liturgy from the eighteenth through the twenty first Sunday form a unit. It is made all the more serious against the background of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem where he will be crucified. In the background we can hear his constant cry: “Change your lives, for the kingdom is at hand.”

These teachings remind the disciple of the uselessness of storing up material goods. We are reminded to choose our options according to the end goals of the Christian life (eighteenth Sunday), the ultimate return of the Lord (nineteenth Sunday), the total commitment to Christ that the gospel demands (twentieth Sunday). The call to salvation is addressed to all, but the door is narrow. Hurry, for the door will not remain open forever! (twenty- first Sunday).<sup>1</sup>

In following this teaching, we do no more than follow Jesus himself. It is the way he himself had to walk. Jesus, the Word made flesh, impoverished himself so that we might become rich and share in his divinity. His driving force, the fire that burned within him was to do the will of the Father, and he would not rest until it had been accomplished no matter what the cost. In undergoing the baptism of his passion, he would be raised up by the Father so that the whole world might be filled with the fire of his Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he will go through his own narrow door. On the way someone asks him: “Lord, will only a few be saved?” It was a question debated among some Jews that in the age to come, all the people of Israel would be seated at the heavenly banquet. The prophetic tradition, however, was not as confident. Ethnic and religious bonds would not be enough. In the age to come different standards would be applied. Jesus belongs to the prophetic tradition.<sup>3</sup>

The question, I dare say, has occurred to us all especially if we have paid close attention to the demands of the gospel while conscious of our own weakness. It is a question we might ask ourselves in times of discouragement or in the hope of being reassured: “If not many are to be saved, what chance do I have?”; “If in the end there is room for many, in fact most, why do I need to worry about earning a high place in the kingdom?”<sup>4</sup>

We can see from the gospel that it is the wrong question to ask, and Jesus will not answer it. Instead, the answer should be: “What must I do to inherit eternal life” (Luke 18:18). The way to the messianic banquet is by the narrow gate.

Two images come to my mind: The first is that of the city gate of Jesus’ time. Caravans loaded with the riches of the country side and foreign lands pass through it.

Great crowds of people enter casually, as well as parades of soldiers. But there is another entrance alongside of the great portals. It is the narrow gate which admits only one person at a time and is strictly controlled. The second image is that which Jesus gives of himself. In speaking of himself as the Good Shepherd, he states that “I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pastures” (Jhn 10:9).

In either case, it is not a case of casually walking in off of the street. The gospel uses the word “strive” that is a struggle is involved, a struggle against ourselves and whatever would tear us away from God. Jesus warns us against an over confident approach. We cannot take our salvation for granted. A serious effort is needed to attain eternal salvation.<sup>5</sup>

Our first reading from Isaiah invites all nations to the worship of the one God in Jerusalem. A sign will be given: the summons of the Gentiles together with the Jews of the Diaspora to temple worship. Some of the Gentiles will be sent to evangelize distant lands. Some will even serve in the temple ministry.

It is against this background of universal salvation, that Jesus tells his contemporaries that the first will be last and the last will be first. The rejection of Jesus by his coreligionists will bring about the fulfillment of this prophecy. The parable as told in Luke is, however, a warning to his gentile converts and to us down through the ages that vigilance and repentance is ongoing. Without that entrance through the narrow gate will be impossible.

The narrow gate will always include the cross even as it did for Christ. And that is why the Letter to the Hebrews takes up the theme of suffering. At the end of the preceding passage to our excerpt, we are told to turn our eyes to Jesus who, having endured the sufferings and humiliation of the cross, entered into the glory of God (Heb 12: 1-4). The author of Hebrews sees suffering as discipline, even instruction by a loving Father, molding us in the image of Christ. It is not to confound us but to strengthen us and deepen our filial relationship, the gift of the Spirit. What we are always to keep in mind is that the very cross with which Jesus was rejected and condemned was turned into a sign of victory by his loving embrace of the will of God. And so suffering, by uniting us to the crucified Christ, becomes part of the door that will lead us into the kingdom.

The cross is one feature of the narrow door. But as narrow as the door is, we do not come through it alone. Another feature of its architecture is the spending of ourselves for others even as Christ spent himself for us. The Christian way means detachment from self, going the extra mile, and turning the other cheek. Each day calls us to new challenges as we live out our faith following in Christ’s footsteps:<sup>7</sup> “Love one another as I loved you” (Jhn 15:12).

There is another image of a door. We are all familiar with the painting of the thorn crowned Christ, lantern in hand knocking at the door of our hearts. Opening wide that door to let Christ in there to reign and to live in his friendship propels us through the

narrow gate of the kingdom.

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Days of the Lord, v.6 Ordinary Time, Year C (Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press, 1991) 182
- <sup>2</sup> Days of the Lord, p. 184
- <sup>3</sup> John Shea, The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers And Teachers, Year C (Collegeville, Min., Liturgical Press, 2006) 233
- <sup>4</sup> Days of the Lord, 178
- <sup>5</sup> Desmond Knowles, Voicing a Thought on Sundays (Dublin, Columba Press, 1991) 352
- <sup>6</sup> Roland J. Faley, Footprints on the Mountain (N.Y., Paulist Press, 1994) 564
- <sup>7</sup> Roland J. Faley, 565