

21ST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR C (2025)

There is a question that continues to obsess a certain type of religious person, and one that was asked directly of Jesus in today's Gospel reading: 'Lord, will those who are saved be few?' The eternal destiny of individual human beings is a point of interest not only for many Christians, but also for those of other faiths, as they seek to bolster their own sense of safety and superiority; and, conversely, to assure themselves of the depravity and damnation of others. And yet, as our Gospel reading makes clear, it is a subject in which Jesus seems uninterested; and a question that he refuses to answer: notice that he responds to the person who asks him, 'Lord, will those who are saved be few?' by telling his hearers to 'Strive to enter through the narrow door'. Jesus turned the question about the salvation of others into a personal challenge: 'Never mind about everyone else,' he says, 'concentrate your efforts on making sure you are saved'.

But, as is always the case when we read the Gospels, we need to understand them in the context in which they were originally written; and consider their application not only for our lives, but also for the lives of those to whom Jesus' words were first addressed. One of the predominant themes in S. Luke's Gospel is the proclamation and unfolding of the Kingdom of God – that spiritual entity that is God's vision for human life and flourishing, and is now manifest in the mystical Body of Christ's Church. And S. Luke wrote his Gospel in such a way that Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God takes place as he makes his way

to Jerusalem to embrace his destiny – his Passion, crucifixion and Resurrection, which will redeem and offer salvation to all humanity, and be the true inauguration and vindication of God's Kingdom on earth.

But, to the people of Israel of Jesus' day, the Kingdom of God was not only spiritual: there was a real and urgent physical threat to the Jewish nation and religion, in the form of Roman aggression and oppression, which would culminate in the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. Luke wrote his Gospel after the Temple had been destroyed; and would have understood Jesus' words as an immediate warning to his own people to accept his teaching, and turn away from their corrupt religious practices, so that they might embrace true worship and service of God, as Jesus proclaimed and embodied it. Of course, this was not to be, though Jesus did his best to convince the Jewish religious elite that, in him, God was offering Israel its last chance, and that he was the final messenger – the ultimate revelation of divine truth, mercy and grace.

And so, understood in its original context, today's Gospel reading becomes less about the eternal salvation of all humanity, and more about a warning to Jesus' contemporaries to recognise the immediate threat that they faced: the destruction of life as they knew it, because they had refused to heed the message, and live the life, of the incarnate Son of God. But we should be careful not to dismiss this Gospel passage, and assume that it has no relevance to, or application for, us; because it challenges the spiritual complacency of Jesus'

disciples in every age, and demands that we constantly evaluate and, if necessary, reset our priorities in favour of the values and vision of the Kingdom of God.

For, Jesus' words have a two-fold meaning: first, they address those who are inquisitive about the salvation of others; and, secondly, they challenge us to take our own discipleship more seriously, lest we fail to enter through the narrow door. As Jesus' response in the Gospel makes clear, he refuses to give statistics and figures to satisfy human curiosity about the eternal destiny of individuals; and we should understand by that refusal that the salvation of others is not our primary concern. Many of us will have been asked personally, 'Have you been saved?' by someone concerned – sincerely, though erroneously – to preach to us their version of the Gospel, even though we have been baptised, and are practising Christians. Such methods of evangelism are futile because they misunderstand the true nature of salvation, which is a process that begins in baptism, and will only be complete when sin and death are finally conquered, and all God's people are gathered to him in the heavenly Jerusalem.

But that should not stop us from caring about others' eternal salvation, nor absolve us from playing our part in obeying Christ's command to make disciples of all nations. For, whether it is considered controversial or even offensive to say so, the truth remains: human salvation is only possible in and through Jesus Christ, who is the door, the gateway, to eternal life and blessedness with God. Each and every human person must take responsibility for his or her own

salvation, which is God's gift to us through faith in his Son. But God doesn't bully or threaten us: rather, he takes us seriously by respecting our free-will to choose whether to accept or reject Jesus' claims; though, as with all the choices we make, we will have to take responsibility for them, both now and in eternity. But, even once we have accepted those claims and been baptised, there remains the danger that we allow ourselves to become self-satisfied and superior; convinced that everything is going to be fine, and assured of our privilege. And our spiritual enemy uses that complacency to draw us away from fidelity to Jesus and his Gospel, through the apathy that hardens our hearts to God's grace, the sloth that persuades us that the bare minimum is good enough, and the pride that makes us believe that we have no sin, and therefore do not need to change. Jesus' words today remind us that we cannot simply stroll through the narrow door by chance: the Christian life requires both energy and commitment, not least in a society in which the moral and spiritual foundations of our nation are being questioned and challenged at every turn. We Christians face increasing pressure, not only to defend our faith, but to proclaim it with courage and confidence: indeed, the salvation of souls depends on our no longer taking our commitment to Jesus and his Church for granted. Only personal faith in Jesus Christ, and a wholesale return to the practice of Christianity, can begin the process of healing the many ills in our society. The door is open, and salvation is free; but discipleship is costly, and the only gateway to heaven is the Cross.