

Homily for August 22, 2004
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 66:18-21

Psalm 117:1-2

Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13

Luke 13:22-30

Jesus is our way to the Father – a narrow way.

Through towns and villages Jesus went teaching, making his way to Jerusalem where he was going to be murdered. He must have known that. In a sense, it was the reason he went. It was the only way left in order to be faithful to the Spirit he chose to follow. He was going in through that narrow door, death, over the narrow path leading to it.

While he was thinking of all this, there came a man who asked: “Sir, will only a few be saved?” The person who raises the question of who will be saved is anonymous. It is not one of the disciples, but “someone.” The question is posed from the perspective of quantity – how many. Significant also is the negative tone of the question. It presupposes that salvation will be limited only to a few. The issue then becomes not just that God’s saving love is limited, but more precisely, how limited that love is – how really loaded, freighted with conditions.

Jesus, in his characteristic way of not being tricked by clever questions, refuses to address the issue of quantity regarding salvation. Instead, Jesus focuses on seizing the moments of grace that will lead to

salvation. Jesus did not answer the question directly. He never does. He hardly ever could. His frame of reference was too different from that of his questioners. He only said: “The gate is open. It is narrow, but it is open. Everyone should be able to pass. Nobody should be left behind.” He said that even though he had told them before that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for some to go through that narrow gate.

According to some scripture scholars, one of the gates leading into Jerusalem was so narrow that a big, richly loaded camel could not pass through that gate. The gate was nicknamed the “needle’s eye,” just as we now call some roads “bottlenecks.”

The gate is narrow, but it is open. The man wanted to ask, “How many will you let through? How many will your Kingdom of Heaven immigration officers stop? Who will get a visa, a passport, a green card, a residence permit, an identity card, a social security number, or alien’s registration?”

Jesus’ answer was that the gate is open. Free entry. No formalities, no restrictions, no bribes, taxes, complimentaries, watchmen, guards. Nothing. But once more, the gate is narrow. The path leading to it is narrow, too. Nothing can be taken for granted or put

off for a later time. When it comes to salvation, there are no entitlement programs. The issue of salvation is not an issue of quantity. It is an issue of quality.

Boxing champion Muhammad Ali often told this story to his young daughter: A king sensed something special about his slave Omar. Omar served the king well as his personal attendant. The king rewarded Omar for his faithful service with a beautiful robe and set of clothes.

A courtier was very jealous of Omar and looked for a way to discredit him before the king. The courtier noticed that every day, Omar took a large sack into the royal treasury and left with the same sack. The courtier immediately reported to the king that Omar was stealing.

The next morning, the king hid outside the chamber to see for himself. As usual, Omar entered the room, opened the sack – and took out of the sack his old slave robe. In the large mirror in the treasury, Omar said to the reflection: “Omar, once you were a slave. Never forget who you are and how blessed you are.”

The king was deeply moved by Omar’s humility. “I knew there was something special about you. I may be a king, Omar, but you have a king’s heart.”

Our entry into the life of God requires of us an honesty and integrity that we cannot ignore or rationalize in order to justify our passage. The “narrow gate” is the honest confrontation of who we are, what we believe, what we hear God asking of us in the depths of our hearts. The “narrow gate” allows for no acceptable margin of error, no “wiggle room,” no path of least resistance. It is the difficult way of limitless

love, unconditional forgiveness, sacrificial selflessness – but Jesus revealed by his life, death and resurrection that anyone willing to struggle through the “narrow gate” will be welcomed into the eternal dwelling place of his Father. That is what he did on his way to Jerusalem, walking the narrow road, the road less traveled, to that narrow gate of his cross and the life and glory to follow.

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