

The Tragic Truth of The Narrow Gate

21st Sunday of Ordinary Time - Year C

Isaiah 66:18-21
Psalms 117: 1, 2 (Mark 16:15)

Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13
Luke 13:22-30

One thing you can always count on with Jesus of Nazareth is that He will never, ever, give assurances of one's salvation, especially when asked. Of course He has the occasional, "you are not far..." statements (Mk 12:34), and every now and then gives the promise with a condition that is extraordinarily difficult, if not virtually impossible for the recipient - "Go sell all you have and give to the poor..." (Mt 19:16-22ff), but at no point does Jesus tell anyone personally, "Well done! You've made it!"

The one exception to this is as Jesus hung upon the Cross and said to the "good thief": "Today you shall be with me in paradise." The person to whom he gave this assurance, however, was being crucified alongside Him, and did not have much living left to do. To the rest, Jesus never gives an assurance; and in some cases, not only does he assure the opposite -- "for human beings it is impossible..." (Mt 19:26) -- but he makes that opposite assurance very

personal.

The reason is that Jesus allows us no latitude whatsoever for complacency; a self-assurance of our own salvation, accompanied by unawareness of actual deficiencies in our conformity to His Gospel, leading to a lack of true vigilance towards the very real dangers of actually losing salvation.

The strongest example of this is in Jesus teaching on the Narrow Gate. Unlike in parables like the Wise and Foolish

Bridesmaids, or the Rich Fool, or the Talents, or even the Last Judgment, all of which deal with people who are rejected by God and denied the eternal Kingdom, the words Jesus speaks regarding the Narrow Gate are directed explicitly at his listeners, and by extension, through the Scriptures, to us.

When asked, "Will only a few people be saved," not only does Jesus *not* give a heavenly promise, but He gives a progression of assurances that are the exact

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The Parable of the Narrow Gate

opposite of what we would hope His answer to be, and which gets more and more personal as the answer goes on. Using the image of entering through the Narrow Gate, Jesus' teaching can be summed up: Many will try, few will succeed and you will be left out. He then continues with a detailed description of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the prophets and people from both east and west reclining with the Master, who subsequently casts us out despite our pleas.

Thanks, Lord. Don't encourage us too much!

When it comes to Eternal Life and the promise of salvation, we, as Modern Christians, like to give one another assurances, under the facade of hope. We offer promises on which we have no power to deliver, often falling back on the popular presumptions of "what Jesus would say" rather than listening to "what Jesus *did* say." We like to presume we are going to heaven and look for assurances from our religious preachers that salvation is guaranteed by virtue of the fact that we can't fathom the

very notion of losing it. We even refer to Masses for the deceased as "celebrations of life" rather than "funerals" in which we prayerfully intercede before Almighty God for the salvation of the soul who has been called from this life.

Jesus, however, never gives such assurances, especially when asked. Rather He gives the very real and

personal impression that all of us can easily find ourselves in grave danger of losing salvation simply because we have lulled ourselves into a sense of complacency. Instead Jesus calls us to fully embrace the Kingdom of God, and continually engage in ongoing conversion, and, by God's grace, grow more and more in living the standards Jesus has given us; not by asking "who", "how many", or "are there few who will", but by asking, "what must I *do* to inherit eternal life?".

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