

Twenty First Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 25, 2019
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Homily

When I was a kid, I used to look forward to flying on an airplane. Now, not so much. Even with a preferred seat, I might be squished by the person beside me, and then jostled by the person walking by. When the passenger in front reclines their seat, there's even less space. But I forget about the flight pretty quickly once I reach my destination. I see the one I'm visiting, and forget all about the flight.

In today's Gospel, someone asks Jesus, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" Jesus doesn't answer the question directly, so exact numbers remain a mystery. He does say, "Many will try to enter and will not be able." But remember that Jesus is the good shepherd. He leaves the ninety-nine in search of the one. If even one is not able to enter the gates of heaven, that is too many. If ninety-nine are welcomed, perhaps that is too few. God wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4). He told Isaiah "They shall bring all your kindred from all the nations." We're all called to enter the kingdom. The psalm tells us "Praise the Lord, all you nations!" The kingdom belongs to the poor and lonely, and we're all poor and lonely in the end. "Extol him, all you peoples!" We divide ourselves into categories: good and bad, rich and poor. Jesus invites sinners, which is the broadest category of all. He invites us through his parables, which always have himself at the centre.

Is 66:18-21
Ps 117
Heb 12:5-7, 11-13
Lk 13:22-30

And so Jesus turns the question around: "Strive to enter through the narrow door."

Jesus is the narrow door; "the way, the truth, and the life." We strive to enter through him, because he tells us, "no one comes to the Father, except through me." We accept his word and it grows within us. His word moves us to love and mercy, to make a radical choice, to give him everything. He returns a hundredfold: grace that brings us patience, wisdom and trust. Grace that brings us perseverance, strength and the obedience to do his will.

Jesus also gives us warning. He will turn away those who say, "We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets." He will tell them, "I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evil doers." How can he not know where they come from? In the first reading, the Lord says, "I know their works and their thoughts." God is omniscient; he knows all. But they receive his body and blood and word without striving to assume his struggle against sin. They don't receive him fully with an effort to become like him. They don't conform themselves to Christ in order to become him. They don't allow God to treat them as sons; chastised, trained and accepted.

So Jesus tells us "Strive to enter through the narrow door." The word "strive" in Greek is ἀγωνίζομαι (a go NEE zo may).

It means to struggle, to compete, to do your best. We see people doing that in sports. ἀγωνίζομαι (a go NEE zo may) sounds like the word "agony." Striving can lead to pain...even agony: twisted ankles, narrow losses, utter defeats. But the struggle defines us because of the choices we make. And we don't save ourselves by entering through the narrow door; we're not capable of doing that. Jesus saves us when we choose him; when we accept his challenge to follow him. Then he helps us to win against sin, to grapple with temptation and wrestle down vice. It's not easy, but the second reading tells us to "endure trials for the sake of discipline." Carry on with confidence, "for great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever." Once we arrive, we'll forget about the pain. His face will be our all.