

21st SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (August 21, 2022)

Two weeks ago I asked if any of you have ever been asked “have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior; do you have a personal relationship with him?” Today’s gospel brings to mind a similar question: “are you saved?”—have you ever heard that one? Jesus was asked: “Lord, will only a few people be saved?” His response? There was no clear ‘yes’ or ‘no’, nor did he give a precise number of those who would be saved. But we sure do get a strong sense that some in fact would not be saved. In any event, Jesus was more concerned about each person’s need to “strive to enter through the narrow gate”—to engage, in other words, in the daily, ongoing task and discipline of personal conversion and turning away from sin.

History gives us many examples of those who proclaimed a very narrow and exclusive understanding of who would “make it”, of who would be saved:

--the Jehovah’s Witnesses, founded in 1870, believe that exactly 144,000 (no more, no less) will make it to heaven; this is based on their extremely literal reading of the Book of Revelation. They also believe that those Witnesses who remain faithful but do not make it to heaven will live in an eternal earthly paradise, but all non-Witnesses will be condemned.

--some years ago, Our Sunday Visitor carried a story of a Baptist group in Alabama who announced that of all the non-Baptists in that state (including Catholics, of course), 46% were not saved and thus were in danger of being condemned to hell. A very precise figure to be sure—not 45%, not 47%, but 46%... Catholics make up a very small percentage of Alabama’s population (less than 10%); one of them suggested tongue-in-cheek that his fellow Alabama Catholics wear T-shirts proclaiming: “I’m one of the 46%.”

But that temptation to think about salvation in such narrow terms can be easy to give in to. It was commonly held by many within Judaism that non-Jews (or Gentiles) could not be saved. But our first reading from Isaiah reminds us that God declared his intent “to gather nations of every language” and that “brothers and sisters from all the nations [will be brought] as an offering to the Lord.” Jesus repeats that divine promise in saying that people will come from east, west, north and south “and will recline at table in the kingdom of God.” At the same time, Jesus made it clear that salvation was not guaranteed just because one might belong to the chosen People—even some who ate and drank with him and in whose streets he taught will be cast out and condemned as evildoers.

We Catholics also need to guard against such misguided presumptions. Some have thought and maybe even have been taught that only Catholics have any hope of going to heaven. Back in the 1930’s and 1940’s, for example, there was a Boston priest—Fr. Leonard Feeney—who taught that very restricted view of salvation. That is not and never has been the teaching of the Church; in fact, Fr. Feeney was excommunicated in 1953 but, thanks be to God, was reconciled with the Church before he died.

The traditional saying “outside the Church there is no salvation” must be understood correctly. It does not mean that only card-carrying Catholics can be saved. Instead, the Catechism teaches that it does mean that ‘all salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is his Body’ (n. 846). In other words, everyone who comes to eternal salvation will do so by Christ and by means of his truth and grace which he has entrusted to the Church he established.

Vatican II put it very well in saying: “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ of his Church, but who...seek God with a sincere heart and...try...to do his will as they know it—those too may achieve eternal salvation.”

But we also need to avoid the error of thinking that we are guaranteed heaven just because we are Catholic, that we have nothing whatsoever to worry about. Of course we need to embrace the fullness of our faith and do so gratefully and firmly. But acceptance of these beliefs and practices alone will not do it for us. Unless we live what we believe, unless we seriously heed Jesus’ call to ongoing repentance and conversion, our “Catholic” status will mean nothing on judgment day. Living the gospel of Jesus every day, doing good and avoiding evil, repenting of sin against God and neighbor—these are all at the heart of what It means to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Precisely because we accept Jesus as our Savior, we commit ourselves to living and conducting ourselves as he taught us and as the Church that he established continues to teach us.

We are truly blessed to know and embrace our Catholic faith, and I hope we thank God for that precious gift every day. But we also have our own responsibility to live our faith, to live the two greatest commandments—to love God above all things and to love neighbor as ourselves. None of us yet live those commandments perfectly, and so we need to confess our need for God’s mercy and healing through genuine, daily repentance and conversion. Let’s also remember, by the way, the special power and grace of the sacrament of confession/reconciliation to help us in that daily, lifelong process.

Back to the question I started with: are you saved? Well, we are all redeemed by Jesus’ death on the Cross. God offers us the gift of eternal life through his Son. It is a gift, and gifts by definition cannot be forced on anyone who refuses them or does not desire them...and that is especially true of the gift of salvation that God offers us. In the gospel, Jesus challenged his followers to “strive to enter through the narrow gate”—in other words, the path to heaven is not easy, comfortable, or pain-free. Jesus was very clear about that; how many times did he tell us that we need to pick up our crosses each day if we are serious about following him? We are saved if we put our lives in Jesus’ hands and heart, if we turn away from the sin and evil that attracts us, if we entrust ourselves to the divine mercy and live as he calls us to live. Then we can indeed look forward to reclining at table in the unimaginable joy of the eternal kingdom of God. How amazingly good God is to offer us such a gift!