

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

(Isaiah 66:18-21 / Luke 13:22-30)

21.08.2022

Rejection of Israel and call of the Gentiles to salvation

Dear brothers and sisters,

The theme of today's gospel passage is the rejection of Israel and the call of the Gentiles to salvation. This is a way of saying that some of the first disciples of Jesus who were of Jewish origin will find themselves excluded from the kingdom of God, while, on the contrary, there are pagans who will be called to be part of God's kingdom. Let us try to understand this rejection and this calling of which Jesus speaks, for at first sight it can seem to us to be unjust and somewhat mean.

The temptation for the first disciples of Jesus of Jewish origin was to think that ties of blood with Jesus were enough to save them, even if their conduct deserved their exclusion. But we heard Jesus say in the gospel passage read: "Once the master of the house has got up and locked the door, you may find yourselves standing outside knocking on the door saying: 'Lord, open to us', but he will answer: 'I do not know where you come from'. Then you will start saying: we once ate and drank in your company; you taught in our streets; but he will reply: I do not know where you come from; away from me, all evil doers". Jesus is clear with his first disciples: Their Jewish roots do not give them a right, a privilege, an insurance policy, a priority-pass to enter into the kingdom of God or to be saved. Their Jewish roots give them no rights but only duties.

The temptation is the same for us today, when we think that to be a registered member of the Church is enough to be saved.

Both for the first disciples of Jesus and for us today, the point is that if we want to be saved, if we want to enter into the kingdom of God, we have the duty to try to enter by the narrow door. What is this door? In the tenth chapter of St John's gospel – the chapter of the good shepherd – Jesus says: "I am the gate" (door or gate is the same word in the original Greek text). The rapprochement of these two texts teaches us that Jesus is the door, the gate. This means that only Jesus can save us. Salvation is a gift offered to us by Jesus. If we try to save ourselves, even by our good works, we will not succeed. The narrow door which leads to salvation is Jesus. We enter by the narrow door when we live in relationship with Jesus, when we trust in him, when we listen to his word, keep it within our heart and put it into practice in our daily lives. We enter by the narrow door when we walk the path of life with Jesus who suffered his passion, died for us and is risen for us, inviting us to follow him and enter into in his paschal mystery with Him. We have to die with Christ in order to live with him. Day after day, we have to die to our self-will, to our narrow-minded plans, in one word to ourselves, in order to live with the Risen Lord.

It is not because *we belong to the Church*, because we are a card carrying member of the club that we shall be saved. We also have to *build up in love the Church*, the body of Christ, in the ways by which we live our daily lives, through all our decisions we take and all the actions we pose... striving to live them in accord with the gospel.

It is not because *we share* the Eucharist every Sunday, and even for some of us everyday, that we shall be saved. We have also *to share* all that we are, all that we have with our neighbour, our brothers and sisters in humanity who are in need.

It is not because *we regularly receive the forgiveness* of our sins by our merciful God in the sacrament of reconciliation that we shall be saved. *We have also to forgive again and again those who hurt us* in our daily lives. It is not per chance that Jesus taught us to pray with these words: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”.

The reference by Jesus to people who arrive too late and find the door locked is an allusion to the parable of the ten wedding attendants, more precisely of the five foolish virgins invited to the wedding feast, who went to buy some oil for their lamps and who arrived too late and found the door locked. The bridegroom arrived when they were away. Here too, the message is clear. We shall not be saved because we believed in the Lord yesterday. We shall not be saved because we will decide to believe in the Lord tomorrow. The Lord is coming to save us here and now; we have to be ready to welcome him always. If we want to be saved by the Lord, we have to stay awake because we do not know either the day or the hour of the Lord’s coming. We have to be ever ready to receive the gift of salvation from the Lord when he comes. Grasping the importance of the present moment is essential for us if we are to be saved. This is part of the narrow door too.

This is what it means to enter by the narrow door. If we don’t try to enter into the kingdom of God by the narrow door, we shall be excluded from it, or more precisely we shall exclude ourselves from it. And there is nothing unjust about that. It is a decision we take against ourselves.

Beside this narrow door which leads to life, there is a wider door, a spacious door, one easy to find and one which looks more attractive, but that door leads to perdition. There are so many idols, so many false gods towards which we turn our gaze so easily in the hope of them saving us: I mean other human beings, things, and last, but not least, ourselves! This is the spacious door!

Let us not be afraid. We should not allow the question: “Sir, will there be only a few saved?” to fill us with fear. Those who believe in Jesus will be saved. If we believe in Jesus, we shall be saved.

The salvation offered through our entering by the narrow door is not something reserved to Christians. The salvation offered to us is offered to all. There is a universality of salvation. “There will be weeping and grinding of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and yourselves turned aside. And men from east and west, from north and south, will come to take their places at the feast of the kingdom of God”. How can we understand such an injustice?

Salvation is not something offered only to us as a consequence of our companionship with Christ. On the contrary, it is something freely offered to all people without exception. God excludes nobody. How can some people be saved without knowing Christ? Let us think of those

who lived before the incarnation or those who came after it, but did not get the opportunity to know Christ. Let us not forget that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. If someone does not know Christ explicitly, but is engaged in an honest and humble research of the truth, being respectful of his neighbours and serving them, why should he not be saved? Let us be clear: Jesus tells us that they will be saved. And this is justice too.

Each human being was created in the image and likeness of God. There is in each human being a mysterious presence of God which we call his conscience. God cannot forget his image. God's image cannot be without influencing men and women of good will. Certainly God's revelation through his people Israel and then and above all through his Son Jesus brings us much more grace, but even that is not automatic as we have seen. People who do not know Christ will be saved and people who pretend to know Christ will discover that things are not just as simple as that.

The full picture offered to us by today's gospel is uplifting. God's salvation is offered not only to the disciples of Christ Jesus, but to every human being of good will who seeks the truth with a sincere heart. For those who believe in Christ, for us, it is not enough to go to church and practice with our lips. We have to welcome Christ's life within us and allow him to change our lives. If we live now in communion with Christ, in friendship with him, we have no need to fear the final judgement evoked in Matthew 25. God's judgment will not be arbitrary but the fulfilment of what we are already living. If we live now with Christ, the final judgement will invite us to enter into eternal life with Christ. We are weak and sinners. But if we regularly repent and come back to the Lord, he will welcome us with open arms and his merciful and compassionate heart will embrace us.