

The Narrow Gate

- 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
- August 25, 2019
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There is a tendency of those of us who preach the Gospel to focus on the more amiable, welcoming, easier, softer parts of it and to pass over what is harder, more challenging, more difficult to accept. The result is a soft Jesus rather than the real Jesus who challenges and confronts us, brings us up short and asks us to change.

Today I'd like to take up and not to pass over a very challenging word of Jesus from the Gospel. He is asked, "Lord, will only a few people be saved?" He does not directly answer the question about "a few", but says:

Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough.

What is this narrow gate? What kind of striving is he talking about? What does he mean by people attempting to enter through the narrow gate but not being "strong enough"?

The parallel passage in the Gospel of Mark does not make this word of Jesus any easier, softer, less challenging. In Mark Jesus says:

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few.

I just don't think you can get around it that for those who are confronted by Jesus, either in his time, or to whom the real Jesus is made present in our time, the door, the gate, the road to life is through faith in him, that he is himself the narrow gate. It is a real struggle to have faith in Jesus, that people then or now have to strain and wrestle and exert themselves to go through that narrow gate of faith in him. How many then, and how many now truly accepted or accept him on his own terms? How challenging is true faith? And it is not like it's a one-time thing, once through the narrow gate and you're in; rather, faith is again and again and again a gate that is a struggle to get through. Jesus is the narrow gate, the real Jesus; real faith in him is a life-long struggle to keep squeezing through. Never easy.

A big part of the question, though, is how many people have the opportunity of the real Jesus being presented to them such that they have a chance to believe in him as the way, the truth, and the life? Even for us, how much is the real Jesus presented to us stripped of all the accretions over time and unveiled of what we and our times and our culture would want Jesus to be. Broad indeed are the ways that lead not to who he is but to something other than the real Jesus for us to encounter and to believe in. Don't you think it is true to say that most people in our society, in our country, in the world are never presented with the true, the real Jesus through no fault of their own? And don't you think it is also true to say that each of us with the faith we do have need to

continue to know and believe in the true and real Jesus, that we have the chance, but that we must, as Jesus says, strive, struggle, wrestle, exert to know him in order to believe in him?

The Church in its last council, the Second Vatican Council, has something very important to say on his subject in its most formal teaching, something which is too little known by us as Catholics. After speaking of the salvation of those who are united in Christ in the Church, the dogmatic document on the Church then speaks explicitly of the opening of salvation: 1) to all Christians, 2) to the Jewish people, 3) to Muslims, 4) to those “who in shadows and images seek the unknown God”, 5) to those who “through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart”, striving “to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience”, and 6) to those “who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God (but) strive to live a good life”. All of these the Church declares in its highest level of teaching “may achieve eternal salvation”. (LG 15-16)

The gate is narrow and it is Christ who is the truth of God. We as Christians find that gate to life by an ever more real faith in the real Christ. We are meant to make known that Christ, that truth of God to others: by our lives, by our witness, by our practice of faith, by our service, by our love as he loves us. Others find that narrow gate to life by following and living their truth, whether their faith as Jews or Muslims, or by living sincerely as Hindus and Buddhists, or by living in accordance with their conscience, their sincere heart. The gate to life is narrow for all, for it means living in accordance with one’s truth. There are many ways to be false to oneself; there is one way to be true to oneself. All must strive, struggle, wrestle, exert to live that way in order to enter life by that narrow gate.

Isn’t it an awesome privilege and responsibility to know by faith Jesus as the narrow gate to life? It must always be, and ever more truly, faith in the real Jesus. In the Eucharist which we are about to celebrate the real Jesus is given to us to accept, however much we understand or whatever we feel. We, in fact, do enter the narrow gate in the Eucharist.