

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, St. Paul, Flowood, August 21, 2016, C
Isaiah: 12: ***“I am come to call all nations and tongues and they shall come and see my glory.”***

One day a lector was wondering whether people listened to all those petitions in the prayer of the faithful. What would happen if she used a sweetly pious voice and softly intoned the request: “Loving God let this holy roof with all its heavy beams fall in on us at this moment.” Then, slightly louder, “For this let us pray to the Lord.” I don’t think she ever did it, but I often think of her when the cue “through Christ our Lord” prompts my automatic “Amen,” although I may not have a clue about what preceded that four-word formula. The opening prayer of today’s liturgy asks, ***“God ... grant us to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found.”*** We’d better think twice before we come in with our “Amen” to that one. That’s part of the message of today’s readings. Are we ready for the place of true gladness, heaven? And how do we get through that narrow gate?

A few years back I visited a parishioner on his death bed in the hospital. He had been suffering from cancer for a few years. Suddenly he said to me, “Father, I don’t think I am worthy of going to heaven.” I thought for a minute and then I announced to him my very basic theory of salvation as sweeping and generous as that of the early Church Father Origen who stated that he thought everybody would be saved after a proper purification after death. I said, “Harry, don’t worry, God made you he has to take you back.” He pondered that for a while and then said, “I feel better now.” He died early the next morning very peacefully personally assured of his salvation.

Being Catholic and Christian we think we have all the merit badges necessary. Today’s Gospel warns us: “After the master of the house has arisen and locked the door, then will you stand outside knocking and saying, ‘Lord, open the door for us.’ He will say to you in reply, ‘I do not know where you are from.’ ”

No one wants to be locked out. Jesus urges us to enter the kingdom through the “narrow gate.” But what is that narrow gate? How do we squeeze through the humble door that leads to life.

Isaiah says this morning: “*Thus says the Lord: I come to gather nations of every language; they shall come and see my glory.*” Yet with a world population of 7.4 billion billions have not heard or responded to the Gospel. World religious population: Christianity, 32.5%; Islam, 21.5%; Hinduism, 14 %; Buddhism, 6 % ; Chinese Religions,6%

The Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* paragraph 16 puts it this way. *Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel. She knows that it is given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life. (LG, 16)*

Jesus told us a while ago, “Knock and the door will be opened.” Today he seems to imply that He does not know us and tells us to enter the kingdom through the narrow gate.

Discipline is features in our first reading this morning. I had the misfortune of sending my first nine years of priesthood as disciplinarian in the seminary and later high school principal for a number of years. Young people and I suppose old people don’t take to discipline too easily, but that’s how we squeeze through that narrow door.

I have been reading Jan Varnier’s *Becoming Human*. Vanier for years taught philosophy and theology then founded L’Arche, the Ark, homes for people with developmental disabilities. Living with the disabled he learned how to be truly human. He found living with these people a tremendous revelation. You might read the wonderful article in the August 15-22 issue of *America Magazine*, *Out of the Shadows, making room in your parish for people with disabilities*. How about St. Richard’s Special Children Prgram.

Vanier notes that our society honors those who are powerful, clever, the winners, and belittles the weak. The Olympic motto is *altius, citius, fortius*, Higher, Faster, Higher, all comparatives. The Olympics celebrates those who win the gold. Vanier lived with and learned from those with disabilities just as Jesus came to live with the poor, the crippled, the outcast. Isaiah says of the Messiah. *He will not lift up his voice or make it heard in the street, a bruised reed he will not break and a flickering wick he will not quench.* What a fine description of how Jesus was drawn to the weak, the disabled. He excludes no one.

So Vanier calls us to love and live with the disabled, with the broken and bruised. The last chapter of his book is all about forgiveness, forgiving ourselves for our own brokenness and disabilities, our mistakes our weaknesses. Accepting ourselves for just who we are. Most of us, and should I say, all of us here are hardly Olympic material. No Bolts here. We are to forgive those with serious developmental disabilities. Don't run away from them, but live with them and care for them. They have so much to teach us about being human. Mothers already understand that.

I met a mother once who had adopted a child blind, deaf and unable to speak and lovingly cared for him for years, a shining example of caring for the weak, the bruised reed, the flickering wick. To love, to forgive and to care for someone so disabled, so fragile, so limited, surely teaches us how to be truly human. And we all know other people just like that lady.

The Lord who hangs from the cross so prominently in front of us as we enter St. Paul Church reminds us from that cross, *“Father forgive them, for they do not know that they are doing.”* He is telling us to forgive ourselves for our weakness, our failings, our shortcomings and to forgive, love and care for others especially those with disabilities. That is my suggestion this morning of how we enter that narrow gate. Forgiveness is never easy for us, but that's how we save ourselves and others too. That's how we go out to the whole world and tell the good news. *“Lord will only a few people be saved?” “God ... grant us to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found.”*