

DO YOU THINK EVERYBODY IS GOING TO MAKE IT?

A number of years back I ran into a grade school classmate of mine and his wife. He was part of the group of guys I hung around with. He asked me how I liked being a priest and I told him I was pretty happy. In turn, I asked him if he was getting to Church very much. He replied that he didn't get there too much but he wasn't too worried about it and that he was kind of counting on knowing me. Like: I've got a friend in the business and you're it. A kind of classmate "Get out of Jail" free card. I told him that I wasn't so sure that it worked that way. Secondly, what if I don't go first to be there to run interference for him. It was a humorous conversation.

The question in today's gospel reminded me of that encounter. It's a real question. God has created us human beings and he has placed us on this earth for a reason. He has endowed us with life and intellect and freedom and conscience. He has made his grace available to us in and through Jesus Christ and the Church and the sacraments and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. So there must be an expectation that God has of you and me or God would not have made us, given us life. There is something he wants from us and of us and for us. But God will neither force it upon us nor steal it from us. After creation and because of salvation, God has renewed the face of the earth and what God wants from us is what God wanted from our first parents and from everyone after them. God wants our love. He wants us to choose to love him because He has first loved us. But God will not make us give to him the very thing he most desires.

It must be possible to say no to God, to deny God or we aren't really free. The trees and the animals give God praise just by being. We humans have to choose to do so. And if we don't? If we choose to ignore God or go our own way? Are there any repercussions? *Of course not, it makes no difference to God if you follow his way or you join ISIS and kill innocent people of all kinds and ages. It is all the same to God.* Really? Does that make sense to you? To anybody? Do any of us really think that how we live, what we think, how we act, what we do or do not do makes no difference to God? Well, it does make a difference. Remember Jesus story where he says I was hungry and you gave me to eat, a stranger and you welcomed me. Whenever you did it for the least other person God counts that as something done for Him. The gift of self. And for those who did not give drink to the thirsty nor clothes to the naked. Jesus says that they will be thrown into the fires of Gehenna with the wailing and gnashing of teeth. It makes a difference.

Even the Gospel for today references this. Lock the door with the unbelievers and uncaring on the outside wanting in but not getting in. Why would Jesus tell these kinds of stories if it doesn't matter to God what we do? And I will tell you things that also don't work. Having wealth will not help us in and of itself. If we use our wealth to do great good then God will be pleased by that. If not we will go to the fires of hell no matter how much money and stuff we had. Having been very powerful will not help either. What is our power, my power before the power of God's love? Being a person or family of privilege will make no difference unless we used that to serve the Lord and the poor. Being a celebrity won't count for anything there even though it seems to count for an awful lot here. Leading a very busy, productive life won't do it unless the poor are benefitted and God is praised by our effort. The three most

significant realities of our lives as human beings are money, sex and power (or control), That is why when a man or woman consecrates his life to God as a Religious that person takes three vows: poverty, chastity and obedience. Each vow contradicts the way of the world about power, sex and money.

Being baptized is necessary but not enough to get us into heaven. Baptism by water and the Spirit, baptism by blood, baptism of desire are all capable of opening the gates of heaven to us. But are insufficient in and of themselves. Baptism is a gift to the person. The Lord seeks the gift from the person. Can we earn our way in? No, actually we can't. And the reason is that the gift of heaven has already been won and the reality of heaven has been offered to us all by Christ. And the only way we can enter the kingdom is by receiving the gift in a gracious and grateful manner. God desires this union, this communion with us. So it is up to us to Receive Communion so as to be among those entering through the narrow gate.

In the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem the Church is very ancient and the door into the church is very small and narrow. A normal sized person cannot simply walk in through the door. You have to bend over because the entrance is so small. It was designed so that no horseman could ride in and begin to slay those believers gathered inside for safety reasons. But there was also a sense that no one was going to enter into this Church which holds within it the site where the Word became flesh for all time without a bow of reverence and a bending of the knee. And you can't enter without doing both of those things—whether you believe or not.

What Jesus brought he did not bring only for a few. Jesus offers an invitation to recline at table in his Father's house. How does that happen? It happens when we listen to Jesus, heed his words, accept his teaching, live his values right here where we live and imitate his example by giving praise and thanks to God. In the first reading from the end of the prophecies of Isaiah there are references to ancient lands that God will gather all people from—Tarshish, Put, Lud, Mosoch, Tobal, Javan. All sound very foreign to our ears. But we know these countries. We know them by different names: Tunisia, Libya, the Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia, Greece. Sounds a little bit like some of the United Nations. How about the Olympics? There are almost two hundred countries involved in some manner in the present Olympic Games. 75 of those countries have one at least one medal. But almost 125 have won nothing in terms of medals but their representative athletes, their Olympians are all there, doing their best, trying their hardest, representing their countries, hoping to stand on the podium and hear their national anthem played as a sign of excellence in sporting activity. The Olympics bring out the best in those athletes. They strive to do their best, give their best and be their best.

That is what Jesus' invitation is designed to do. And we respond to that invitation in the same way these athletes respond to this invitation to participate in the Olympic Games. Not everyone can win the gold or even medal but all who participate are forever recognized as Olympians. It is similar in the kingdom of God. But there must be the effort, the striving, and the willingness to go all in for the good that is right before our eyes. And it is the Lord himself who invites our participation who will be there to congratulate us with a few simple but very welcome words: "Well done my good and faithful servant. Enter into the Kingdom of my Father." Through the narrow gate.