

Homily for the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

August 21, 2022

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Isaiah 66:18-21 (The Lord will gather the nations to see his glory.)

Responsory: Psalm 117 (Go out to all the world and tell the Good News.)

Second Reading: Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13 (Whom the Lord loves he disciplines.)

Gospel: Luke 13:22-30 (Strive to enter through the narrow gate.)

Today's gospel begins with someone asking Jesus, "Lord, will only a few people be saved?" One who asks such a question is probably hoping to determine if *he himself* can be saved. He wants to know whether the bar will be set so high that people like him may be excluded, or whether the Lord will be as merciful and lenient as many of his teachings suggest. Jesus' answer is somewhat confusing. On the one hand, he says, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough." So, apparently, it *will* be difficult to enter into the kingdom of God. Many will try, but only a select few will make the cut. On the other hand, Jesus also says, "People will come from the east and the west and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God." That sounds like an immense throng of invited guests, not an exclusive club of close followers. Jesus seems to be contradicting himself. But, the really disturbing part is when he suggests that many who think that they should be first in line to enter the kingdom of God will see others enter before them, and some might even find the door slammed in their faces. People who expect a warm welcome might be stunned to hear their Master say to them, "I do not know where you are from."

This passage serves as a warning to all of us about two forms of self-righteousness that are all too common among the Christian community. One is the belief that our ticket to heaven is already punched, by virtue of our baptism and our practice of the faith. Perhaps we *are* on solid ground, but we should still be wary of growing complacent or presumptuous. Christ calls all of us to continual growth in holiness, up until our final breath. There is no point at which any of us should say to ourselves, "My spiritual journey has ended; the door to heaven lies open before me." With that attitude, we might just end up on the outside, wailing and grinding our teeth. The other danger is our tendency to judge other people and to consider ourselves morally superior to them. Unfortunately, some of our Catholic leaders seem to encourage that dangerous habit, and even exemplify it, by constantly talking about the grave moral evils that they see in *other people* and rarely mentioning our *universal* call to repentance and mercy. Jesus seems to suggest that those who pass judgment on others may have to wait anxiously as *the very people whom they have condemned* enter into the kingdom of God ahead of them.

One of the most interesting aspects of Jesus' parable is the response of the people who find themselves locked outside. When the Master says to them, "I do not know where you are from," they insist that he *must* know them, because they ate and drank in his company and he taught in their streets. Well, all that proves is that the Master *offered himself to them*. It says nothing about *their response to him*. Was the sharing mutual, or totally one-sided? Did they

listen attentively to his teaching and put it into practice, or did they tune him out? Just showing up isn't enough. The faithful disciple must actively engage with his Master in order to learn from him and become like him.

The Catholic equivalent of those people in the parable is the folks who say, "I attend Mass every Sunday. Isn't that enough?" No, actually, that's not nearly enough to consider ourselves good Catholics or faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. There is nothing especially praiseworthy about eating and drinking in the Lord's company and being present while he teaches. What matters is how actively we engage in the liturgy and how fully we offer ourselves to the Lord while we are gathered for worship.

The prophecy that we heard today from Isaiah can shed some light on this mystery. Isaiah envisions the Jewish people who have returned from exile – the "fugitives," as he calls them – going out to gather people from all the other nations in the region, who likewise suffered under the Babylonians. Although these pagans do not know the God of Israel, the Jews believe that they can be saved, too. But first, they must hear the Good News of God's mercy, and they must come to Jerusalem, to learn about the covenant between God and his people. Hopefully, many of these foreigners will come to believe, and they will join themselves to God's Chosen People.

The image that Isaiah presents is of a sacred procession to the Temple. He compares the horses, chariots, carts, mules and dromedaries that bring the foreigners to Jerusalem to the sacred vessels used by the Jewish people to bring their offerings to the Temple. So, in this case, it is *the people* who are offering *themselves* to the Lord for consecration. That is quite similar to the way we Catholics understand our own Eucharistic celebration.

The centerpiece of the Mass is the Eucharistic Prayer, by means of which the bread and wine are consecrated and transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. However, the people of the assembly offer much more than just bread and wine. Ideally, we offer up *our very selves*, like those foreigners coming to worship in Jerusalem. The Eucharistic Prayer is *our sacrifice* of thanks and praise. As we remember and celebrate the way Christ gave himself up for us, his sacrifice becomes present to us, and we participate in it. Thus, we join ourselves to Christ, forming a mystical *communion* with him and with one another, a communion that is strengthened even more when we physically receive his Body of Blood moments later under the sacramental signs of bread and wine. Nourished by that intimate contact with the Lord, we can go out into the world to put into practice all that we have heard in the liturgy of the Word that day.

As we reflect on our experience of the Mass, all of us, including the celebrant, might ponder whether we could give more of ourselves to the Lord. How can we open our hearts more fully to the Lord's love and open our ears to hear and understand his teaching? How can we participate more *consciously* throughout the Mass, listening attentively to the entire liturgy of the Word, and paying close attention to all the prayers that are offered up to the Father *on our behalf*? Let us never be content just to show up and be passive observers. Rather, let us come with the expectation of meeting the Lord and offering ourselves to him.