

A NARROW OPENING AND A LOCKED DOOR

A couple of years back at a Pastoral Council meeting we had a pretty long and heartfelt discussion about why so many of our parishioners were not coming to Mass anymore or perhaps only infrequently. There were a lot of reasons suggested but I remember being struck by one woman saying: “You know Father, there is just so much going on in the Church and in our society right now, and in the life of our family and so many young families trying to fit everything in I think a lot of times we just put our faith on the back burner.” I thought at the time: “You know, I think that’s pretty accurate. I think a lot of parents are doing that.” We put our faith in the Our Lord on the back burner. Eventually, we think, we will move it back to a front burner where all the real stuff gets cooked. And when that happens everything will be okay. God is good. The Lord will understand. We’ll just say we’re sorry and all will be well.

The French playwright Jean Anouilh once wrote a play entitled “The Last Judgment.”

All those people who have lived good lives in accordance with the Commandments are densely clustered at the gate of heaven, eager to enter in, sure of their admittance, pumped up and bursting with impatience. All at once, a word starts spreading: “Do you see those people over there? What are they doing here? They didn’t live good lives. Are they going to be forgiven too?” For a minute, everybody’s dumbfounded at who the Lord is also letting into heaven. They look at one another in disbelief, gasping and sputtering, “After all I went through!” “If only I’d known this...” “I just cannot believe this is happening!” Exasperated, they work themselves into a fury and start cursing God; and at that very instant the ground opens beneath them and they fall into hell, condemned. And very surprised. In the end, God desires to extend his mercy everywhere BUT God also desires that we unite with Him in doing this too, living this way too. The Lord is very particular about this. His will is His way. He wants us to open to it and embrace it. It is very clear understanding of things and a very narrow view of things. “Strive to enter through the narrow way.” Oh! That is the final judgment. Will I allow God to be God—on God’s own terms? Will I align myself and live in accordance with the way the Lord lived and shown to us by Jesus Christ? And will I realize how important this is—right now? How urgent this is—right now? There is not time to put any of this on the back burner.

The way to get to heaven is to want other people to get in too. The judgment that there are other people--sinners--who don't deserve to get into heaven will keep you out. Be compassionate and understand *why* they are the way they are. Don't judge. Forgive. And do it now. “Too late.” Every hear anybody say that to you? Why didn’t I pay more attention? I ran out of time. I thought I had all the time in the world.

AND, in many areas of our lives we kind of rely on ourselves. We think: “I will use my connections. I have a lot of resources. I have some influence there. I know my way around. I am familiar with a lot of those people. I have a great deal of experience to draw on.” None of that will matter. None of that will work. Once the Lord shuts the door that door is closed. Period. Either we embrace God’s will or we do not. Either we cooperate with God’s grace in each moment or we do not. BUT we think: “I thought I was told that God loves me no matter what. That it doesn’t matter what I do, God is good.” We may think we have heard that but that is not the message in the Scriptures. It surely isn’t the message in today’s gospel. Being on the outside looking in? Not a good place to be. And we must be very clear: God’s love for me is not at issue, it is not on trial here. “I” am on trial.

In Isaiah the prophet Our Lord says: “I know their thoughts and their ways.” Yes he does. “I will set a sign among them.” Yes. He has done this. It is Jesus of Nazareth. Following Christ is not easy. It is demanding. BUT it is worthwhile. And we do not do this on our own or only by our own means. Jesus

breathes his Spirit into each one of us. We have access to the power we need to live his way. In Hebrews we are given advice: “Endure your trials; see them as the discipline meted out by the Lord. Don’t lose heart.” I would add—Don’t delay! You and I, we have less time than we think. Come here to Eucharist each week to hear God’s word and to be fed at his table. Then go forth and live his way so that on the day we are put on trial for being followers of Christ there will be plenty of evidence to convict us.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.