

ARE YOU GOING TO HEAVEN?

(Sometimes we blithely say that we think pretty much everybody will get to heaven except maybe the worst tyrants. Jesus teaches us that each person's gift of freedom is real—and must be used properly to enter the kingdom of heaven.)

Do you think you are going to go to heaven when you die? I know we all hope to go but do you believe you will? Do you believe pretty much everyone will? No matter how they have lived? Do you believe that your experience of freedom is real—that your choices and decisions are truly yours and not predetermined by some divine blueprint? Why has God given us freedom then if everyone is pretty much already in? Is it possible to say “No” to God? A final unrepentant “No?”

Sometimes we hear people say “Well, you can't take it with you; might as well spend it here.” We say this to remind us that no matter what we possess or accumulate here on earth we leave it all behind in the moment of death. But there is more. If you have power or money it is most often the case that you will use your power and money as leverage to get what you want in this life. The question is: if there is no such power or money-reality in the next life how will you function there? How will you function in the next life if you have so completely and thoroughly relied upon human power and human money here? It is a curious question. What are we willing to give up here so as to be able to enter there? That is the nub of the question in the gospel story for today.

That man kept the commandments. Not just some of them but all of them. Jesus is impressed with him. So impressed that he asks more of him than he generally asks of others. But Jesus does more than that. He does something else first that we sometimes miss. He looked at him and loved him. It showed in his face. When someone looks at us with love, if we are really paying attention, it changes us. It has a dramatic and profound effect on us because it is not how we are looked upon all the time. But the man does not let the love in. He is fixated on what Jesus is saying and not how Jesus is looking. And what Jesus says makes absolutely no sense to him. He is being asked to consider something that he considers absurd in the extreme, something that seems ridiculous. He goes away thinking that Jesus doesn't get it; when it is really he who doesn't get it. At times, what Our Lord asks of us seems foolish, we are asked to trust him anyway, to believe it will lead us to heaven.

But, you know, it is not really true about not being able to take it with you. Actually we do take with us quite a lot. What? Anything that no one can take from you, you take with you when you exit this life. There are certain things we do and that we are that we take with us. If you are faithful, no one can take your fidelity from you. You might give it away in an act of infidelity but if you are faithful then you bring your fidelity into the kingdom. If you are a person of the truth, then no one can take that away from you. They might try to silence you or compel you to lie but they cannot take your truthfulness from you. It is who you are. If you have wisdom born of reflection upon the experiences and sufferings of this life no one can take that wisdom from you. You may be silenced but it remains in you. If you are a compassionate person towards others, no one can remove that from you although they may try to stifle your expression of it or put limits on it.

No one can steal your generosity, nor pilfer your love for people or your love for God. These are your wedding garment for the feast that heaven is.

But we can also clothe ourselves in other things—power or money or possessions or status or influence or importance or pull or control. We can put on a garment of secret lusts and silent greed. We can act with jealousy but shield others from its truth. But no inordinate desire, no unbridled lust, no slothful desire will make it into the kingdom of God. None of these things in which we sometimes seek to clothe ourselves here on earth are fitting for the kingdom. The misuse of our freedom in this life will not stand in the next. We must be rid of these inordinate things so as to clothe ourselves in that which is of God. We must want to be rid. We must ask God to do that for us. We cannot do it ourselves—and yet it must be done.

The real crippling disease in this life is the desire for self-reliance, not God-reliance, as we fail to acknowledge our genuine need—for forgiveness, for redemption, for genuine salvation. The inordinate and secret desire which I allow to operate from within me will devour me. We do have an infinite longing within us, in our human hearts but it can only be satisfied by God. Too often we try to satisfy this desire with something other than God. It is a lie that we can have it all. It is not good for us to think that we can have it all. What we can have is what we allow God to give us—virtues, love, mercy—and which we make room for in our lives by relinquishing the desire for more and for control. When the Word of God became flesh it was not in wealth or power. He chose to come without, so that He could identify with us—and we could identify with Him.

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