

21st Sunday (C)

21st August 2022

'Here is the little door'

Is 66: *all your brothers ... from all the nations to my holy mountain in Jerusalem.*

Ps 116: *Go out to the whole world, proclaim the Good News.*

Heb 12: *the Lord trains the ones that he loves ... Suffering is part of your training.*

Lk 13: *try to enter by the narrow door*

If you've never been, I sincerely hope that at some point in your life you get to go to the Holy Land. I didn't go until 2011, and now I have been 4 times! It provides a wonderful insight into Scripture and the life of Christ, and gives one's faith a real boost, to be walking where Jesus Himself once did. One of the key sites to visit on a Holy-Land pilgrimage is of course Bethlehem, just a short journey away from Jerusalem. What might one expect in Bethlehem? There's a church built over the reputed site of the birth of our Lord, called the Church of the Nativity. But how to get in? It's not obvious at first, its façade seems an impenetrable stone wall! But no ... in one corner, there's a door, a *tiny* door, no more than 2' x 4' — it's the main door into that historic Church at the heart of Christendom, the 'door of humility.' To enter and visit that place where God stooped down, bent down to His creatures and became man, one has to stoop low, bend down, and crouch to enter.

It reminds me of an exquisite little Christmas poem, sometimes performed at carol concerts though not that well known, "Here is the Little Door" by G K Chesterton's wife, Frances. I don't know if she had in mind the Bethlehem church's 'door of humility' when she wrote that poem about crouching to enter to see the newborn Christ-child, but I can't separate them in my own mind.

I also think of this tiny little doorway in Bethlehem whenever I hear — as in today's Gospel — Jesus speak of the narrow gate that He invites us to enter. What prompts that image of Jesus's? It's a simple, but searching question put to Him — "Sir, will there be only a few saved?" Perhaps that's a question that bothers us, too, deep down ... though maybe we often ignore it, or put it out of our mind. Will many be saved? Who will make it to heaven, and who will not? Will *I* be saved?!! Jesus's answer is not to give out the figures, the numbers of the saved and the damned, but to bypass that with a direct, personal invitation to the one who questioned Him: "try your best to enter by the narrow door."

Our Lord asks him, and he asks us, therefore, to be attentive, to have a focus on aiming for this narrow door, in other words to have a real *concentration* on what we're doing. Life is full of all sorts of distractions — some of them perfectly good and innocent — but these shouldn't allow us to veer off the path of true life. Our Lord uses a phrase that has entered the English language, “the strait and narrow,” to indicate the path that we are to follow. His Way — the way of the Gospel — is not a broad avenue in which we have ample latitude to basically live life as we see fit. His is a “strait and narrow way” which demands attention, focus, concentration; it needs us to be serious about our spiritual life. I don't mean “serious” as in lacking in any humour; in fact, many of the holiest people have a lightness and a cheerfulness that is infectious. But we can't be *laissez-faire* about our faith, our prayer, our religious lives. We need to apply ourselves, we need to be committed and make sacrifices for the Lord.

On the one hand, finding that narrow way — that small but *open* door — and sticking to that path is not hard,

for the Lord Jesus has trodden it before us, He has shown it to us without any shadow of a doubt. Our faith is not some esoteric set of beliefs, only for the highly educated or elite initiates. No — it's in plain sight, it's spelt out clearly by Our Lord in His human words and actions, by His ministry and by His sacrifice. Rarely, if ever, is Our Lord obscure or unclear. He has shown us the way, and it is Himself. He is, as He says, “the Way, the Truth and the Life.” “Come,” He says, “follow Me.” We don't need to begin from scratch in order to work out what it means to live a good life. The Lord sets out the principles of holiness, based on our loving God and neighbour, keeping our selfishness in check, and with our sights set on heaven. On that level, our faith is not difficult. We are not in the dark: the Gospel is out in the open for all to see. Our Lord spoke it not in secret, but in broad daylight.

The problem comes, not in the clarity of Our Lord's message, but in the ever-present temptation to sin, to ignore the message, to follow the distractions. This is why Our Lord keeps warning us, and reminding us: follow Me!

— keep to “the strait & narrow,” don’t lose sight of Me, don’t abandon Me, don’t give up on your daily prayer, don’t stay away from the Church and the Sacraments! Jesus gives us these clear reminders in the Gospel not to harangue us, but to protect us! He is our Shepherd, our “good shepherd,” who cares so much for us. This is why He gives us these reminders, and sometimes they are stern reminders. I’m OK with that, I know I need it. I know I need every day to curb my tendency to be lazy in my faith, and to apply myself to my prayer and my charity.

Going back to that narrow door being a ‘door of humility,’ surely the key to life — the key to life in Christ — is in *humility*, in stooping down before the majesty and the wisdom of God, who knows infallibly how to bring us through that narrow gate safely and into the light of life. Let us not bristle with indignation, nor flex our independence so much, that we miss our chance to enter into life. Ps 94, which many in the Church use every day at the very start of the Office prayers in the morning, puts it beautifully: “*Come in, let us bow and bend low, let us*

kneel before the God who made us, for He is our God and we the people who belong to His pasture, the flock that is led by His hand ...” (Ps 94)

There is also a beautiful prayer by Padre Pio, called simply “Stay With Me, Lord,” which expresses this absolute need for the Lord to keep us attentive to being close to Him always. I won’t quote all of it (maybe you might like to look it up), but here are the opening lines. These, don’t forget, are words of a terrifically holy Franciscan saint, ... and yet he knew just how easily he could fall away. We need to pray the same, daily ...

<p>Stay with me, Lord, for it is necessary to have You present so that I do not forget You. You know how easily I abandon You.</p> <p>Stay with me, Lord, because I am weak and I need Your strength, that I may not fall so often.</p> <p>Stay with me, Lord, for You are my life, and without You, I am without fervour.</p> <p>Stay with me, Lord, for You are my light, and without You, I am in darkness.</p> <p>Stay with me, Lord, to show me Your will.</p> <p>Stay with me, Lord, so that I hear Your voice and follow You.</p> <p>Stay with me, Lord, for I desire to love You very much, and always be in Your company.</p> <p>Stay with me, Lord, if You wish me to be faithful to You ...</p>
--