

The narrow gate

A man once stood up at a prayer meeting and confessed that he had been a drunkard, a wife beater, been unfaithful, aggressive, a jailbird, a robber. You name it he'd done it. And then he stuck out his chest and he said with all sincerity, 'But I want to thank God that, throughout those years, I never lost my religion. The Gospel today is a warning against those who take their salvation for granted.

Whenever it says in the gospel that 'Jesus was making for Jerusalem', it's a symbolic way of saying that he was making for the city of destiny where He would lay down His life for us. That was His narrow path which would lead to Resurrection. It involved rejection, humiliation and the Cross. The Devil had suggested to Him in the Desert to take the wide road to worldly power and recognition but Jesus stood firm.

Following the narrow way of Jesus will almost certainly run counter to the wide way of the world. Some people, for instance, base their morality on opinion polls. They 'follow the crowd' or the latest trend and often take issue with the Church on many moral teachings because it is the 'cool' thing to do but this is hardly entering by the narrow gate.

Have you ever been nagged you for taking your religion too seriously, for trying too hard? Maybe the real problem is that we are not trying hard enough. In today's Gospel Jesus says: 'Try your very best to enter by the narrow door because many will try to enter without success'. This doesn't at all mean that we see ourselves as artisans of our own salvation. Quite the contrary – it's about co-operating with the grace of God without which no one can be saved.

Some evangelical Christians pride themselves on being saved in the here and now but this can betray a dangerous spiritual smugness. Even the great St Paul was loath to entertain such notions. He said: "I'm running in the race for heaven but I'm far from thinking that I have already won. Even though my conscience doesn't bother me", he said, "it doesn't mean I'm acquitted". If we think we're 'home and dried' we might be in for a surprise. The Truth is that we are gambling with our salvation if we stray from the straight and narrow and don't come back on track.

We all rightly hope and pray that our deceased loved ones are gone to a better place but our ultimate destiny is in God's merciful hands. In this context, I noticed that the Catholic Catechism urges priests to 'ease up'

on longwinded eulogies at funerals because they can present an unreal picture of the deceased. This doesn't mean that we say nothing about the person. But ultimately it is only God who judges whether we entered by the narrow door or not. His eulogy is the only one that matters.

The message is: Don't take salvation for granted like the people in Gospel today who had only a peripheral knowledge of Jesus and were denied paradise. Whilst relying ultimately on God's grace and mercy, we do our utmost to be numbered among the elect. Jesus said 'Be you perfect as your Heavenly father is perfect'

QUESTIONS

1. Jesus says: 'the road to life is narrow and few there are who find it. The road to perdition is wide and there are plenty of takers'. How would the group interpret this passage? Discuss

1A. When Jesus says: "enter by the narrow door", does He mean that we scrupulously follow Church teaching to the very last detail, or is there room for discussion or conscientious objection?

2. Do you think that the Pope came to this country in 2010 because the church in England may be slowly but surely losing its catholicity? Are we becoming more protestant in our thinking on the important moral questions of our day?

3. I notice these days that lots of funeral services, even catholic, focus on "thanking God for the life of the person" whereas the catholic priority used to be more focussed on "praying for the happy repose of the person's soul". Discuss.