

21 AUGUST 2022

From my early teens, I remember a Boy Scout meeting at which one of the adult leaders told us that everyone would, sooner or later, get to Heaven. I asked my Dad about this, and he sent me to today's Gospel, from chapter 13 of St. Luke. Asked "will those to be saved be few?", the Lord Jesus answers neither yes nor no. The Lord says, instead, "Strive to enter by the narrow door". Will most people not make it to Eternal Life? Will everyone make it to Eternal Life? What will the percentage be? What are the odds? The Lord Jesus says, in effect, that we are asking the wrong questions. Knowing the answers would do us no good, and might even do us harm, tempting us toward either presumption or despair. The Lord tells us instead to concentrate on what will actually do us good. Concentrate on entering through the narrow door. He tells us elsewhere, after all, "Knock and the door shall be opened". Concentrate on knocking on that narrow door, and after it is opened don't hesitate, but walk right through. Knock, which is to say, take God seriously. If we take Him seriously He will show us what we need to do. Walk through the open door, which is to say obey God's directions. If we do what He shows us we need to do, Eternal Life is ours. Will only a few be saved, or will many be saved? That is not for us to know. What we need to know is that if we knock, the door will be opened, and if we walk through the open door, we will enter Eternal Life. If we take God seriously, He will tell us what we need to do; and if we do what He tells us, we will be saved. It is that simple.

Passing to the "Sermon on the Mount" from St. Matthew's Gospel for a moment, it is striking to me that in Matthew 7:7 the Lord Jesus says "Knock, and the door shall be opened", and only a few verses later in Matthew 13:13 He says "Enter by the Narrow Way" There are two main stages to our Salvation, both only made possible by God's Grace poured out in Jesus Christ, and empowered by that Grace. In the first stage we take God seriously, we knock on the narrow door. If we take Him seriously, He tells us what to do. In the second stage we pass through the narrow door, we do as God has told us to do. If we do what He tells us to do, Eternal Life is ours, through the Death and Resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

What does God want us to do? Every Christian's life is different in detail, but the same in essentials. Today's Second Reading from Chapter 12 of the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us that God wants us to accept His discipline. What that means is that we are, inspired and assisted by God's Grace, to persevere in Faith, Hope, and Love, those three that abide, the greatest of which is Love, as chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians teaches us. Through all of life's difficulties, we are, inspired and assisted by Grace, to remain faithful, hopeful, and loving.

We will encounter difficulties in life. What those will be is mostly unpredictable, but that there will be difficulties is entirely predictable. A man or woman's quality, even at the entirely natural level, is not only tested but sometimes even improved by difficulties. I once asked a young naval officer why the Naval Academy subjected its new midshipman to what seemed to me like a pointless ordeal. He said it wasn't pointless at all. Those kids are mostly pretty talented, and have had success piled upon success all through high school, with some of those successes coming fairly easily. They need to find out what it is like to feel overwhelmed, and learn that they can persevere through that feeling. They need to discover their reserves of determination

and courage. Nearby Wyoming Catholic College's three week wilderness trek for new freshmen serves a somewhat similar purpose. After a week and half even the toughest kids think they can't go on. Yet they almost always do. They discover reserves of courage and determination they didn't know they had. It is in precisely this spirit that the Sacred Author of Hebrews urges "So, strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees" We may feel exhausted by life's trials, but the Holy Spirit has been given to us We have reserves of Faith, Hope, and Love we do not know we have. We can persevere in passing through the narrow door, remaining faithful, hopeful, and loving, whatever life throws at us.

It is a serious error, though a common one, to suppose that God rains down trials and troubles upon us to punish us for our faults and failures. Frankly, while many do not take their faults and failures seriously enough, there are many who take their faults and failures too seriously. God is not fascinated by our faults and failures. He is fascinated, if I dare use that word of Him, by the greatness we can achieve with His guidance and Grace. The greatness He envisions for us is holiness, which is nothing else than determined and courageous Faith, Hope, and Love. Our trials and troubles are not chosen by God to punish us. They are permitted by God to make us stronger. If we remain faithful in the face of trouble, our Faith grows stronger and more attractive. If we remain hopeful in the face of disappointments, our Hope grows stronger and more effective. If we remain loving in the face of conflicts, our Love grows stronger and more beautiful. God does not send us troubles, disappointments, and conflicts to punish us. He permits us to experience troubles, disappointments, and conflicts to enable us, cooperating with His Grace, to become truly great, to become Saints.

"So, strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees" You have more courage and energy than you know, with the Spirit of Jesus within you. Whatever is going on, you can handle it with His Spirit.

"So, strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees" Those words from Hebrews first appear in the Prophet Isaiah. In chapter 35 of Isaiah there is a beautiful hymn in which the Prophet, having anticipated the future destruction of Jerusalem, anticipates the future restoration of Jerusalem.

"Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knee. Say to those who are fearful of heart, 'Be strong, fear not! Behold, you God. He will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you' Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy . . . And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not pass over it, and fools shall not err therein . . . And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away"

The ransomed of the Lord, invited to knock on and then pass through the narrow door, are first of all the Chosen People of Israel. In today's First Reading from chapter 66 of Isaiah, however, the Prophet sees that those ransomed from Israel will have company from all the Nations. "I

come to gather nations of every language; they shall come and see My glory . . . some of these I will take as Priests and Levites, says the Lord". With this passage in mind, the Lord Jesus, in today's Gospel from chapter 13 of Luke, makes it clear that passing through the narrow door is not going to be the reward merely for having Jewish descent. It will be necessary, for Jews as for Gentiles, to knock, and then enter. It will be necessary, for Jews as for Gentiles, to take God seriously, and to do what He tells us to do. It will be necessary, for Jews as for Gentiles, inspired by God and aided by His Grace, to persevere through this mortal life in Faith, Hope, and Love.

We can do this, because Jesus Christ is with us. He lived His entire mortal life in Faith, Hope, and Love, even to death, death on a Cross - and beyond that Cross to the Resurrection. Risen from the Dead and sharing, as God and Man, in Divine Life, Jesus makes His disciples this promise at the end of St. Matthew's Gospel: Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the world. By the gift of His Spirit, He has united Himself with each faithful Christian. United to Him, it is possible for us to live our mortal life as He lived His mortal life. It is possible for us, knocking on the narrow door, to take God seriously. It is possible for us, passing through the narrow door, to do what God wants us to do. It is possible for us to persevere through all circumstances of life in Faith, Hope, and Love. Persevering through this mortal life in Faith, Hope, and Love, we will come to see God face to face in the deathless beauty of Eternal Life.