

21st Sunday Ordinary Time Year “C”
August 24-25, 2019 Cathedral of Saint Paul
Readings: Isaiah 66:18-21; Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13; Luke 13:22-30

Entering through the narrow gate

“Strive to enter through the narrow gate.” With these words, Jesus challenged his listeners to greater acts of virtue in pursuit of heaven. Today’s Gospel is blunt and sobering. We would all love to think that the gate to the Kingdom is wide open—this is precisely what the devil would want us to believe. No wonder there is wailing and grinding of teeth.

Jesus guides us through the narrow gate by enjoining us to live according to what God has commanded. Perseverance is necessary to win the prize, and along with it must be found discipline. The letter to the Hebrews reminds us “My son, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when reproved by him; for whom the Lord loves, he disciplines...” Such discipline perfects our resolve to persevere in the race.

In today’s gospel, many who ate and drank in the Lord’s company and who taught his gospel in the streets were dismayed when Jesus said to them “I do not know where you are from.” These are the souls who follow Jesus only half-heartedly and who spurn the rigor of discipleship in the complacent presumption that the gate to heaven is wide. Trusting in God produces the assurance that he will provide whatever is necessary to complete the race. It is not a presumptive assurance that God will excuse us from the race altogether.

It is never a good idea to deny the personal reality of the devil. But that is precisely what the Superior General of the Society of Jesus did in an interview with an Italian magazine recently.¹ In part he said: “We recognize God as good, fully good. Symbols are part of reality, and the devil exists as a symbolic reality, not as a personal reality.”²

¹ Organized by the Communion and Liberation ecclesial movement in Rimini, Italy.

² Esiste come il male personificato in diverse strutture ma non nelle persone, perché non è una persona, è una maniera di attuare il male... I simboli sono parte della realtà, e il diavolo esiste come realtà simbolica, non come realtà personale. Interview by Rodolfo Casadei, 21 Agosto 2019 *Tempi*

This directly contradicts dogmatic Catholic teaching. Our faith teaches us that angels are “spiritual, non-corporeal beings,”³ that is, without bodies. The devil in fact, is a fallen angel. “Satan was at first a good angel, made by God: ‘The devil and the other demons were indeed created naturally good by God, but they became evil by their own doing.’”⁴

The Superior General ought to immediately clarify his comments, if interview misquoted him. If he meant what he said, I would humbly invite him to spend 30 minutes in meditation before Michelangelo’s masterpiece in the Sistine Chapel, the Last Judgment. It is, after all, just a stone’s throw from the Jesuit headquarters.

Michelangelo Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel was not without its controversy, even as it has fascinated for centuries. If people take the time to ponder it carefully, one cannot but be drawn into a conversation, even interior, about death and judgment. Each Sunday in the Nicene Creed, we recite these words: “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.” Do we stop to ponder them?

Michelangelo certainly did. His masterpiece comprises over 300 figures, arranged in myriad of poses, generally speaking with figures rising to the left as you gaze, and descending on the left. Jesus is in the middle, with raised arm, his mother Mary to his immediate right, gazing downward.

Multiple interpretations exist, but she appears to be gazing to those on the right who are ascending, those who ask for her intercession. Preparatory drawings show her standing and facing Christ with arms outstretched, in a more traditional intercessory posture.⁵ But its final form, the moment of intercession appears to have passed.

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 328.

⁴ Ibid., paragraph 391, quoting Lateran Council IV (1215), DS 800.

⁵ See Barnes, Bernardine, *Michelangelo’s Last Judgment: The Renaissance Response*, 1998, University of California Press, pp. 63-66.

And yet, the faces of the condemned reveal less of pain or agony; rather, they are expressions of disbelief. They are dumbfounded, wondering how has this happened? Why did I presume upon God's mercy? How could I have allowed myself to be lulled into spiritual complacency? "How could I have not realized that the gate was so narrow?"

Presumption leads to complacency. Perseverance leads to consistency. We are challenged today to a discipleship marked by consistent regularity of prayer and steady faithfulness to the commands of the Lord. We are challenged to regard salvation is a gift from the Lord who saves, and never as a presumed reward for our own estimation of worthiness.

Jesus urges us to strengthen our drooping hands and weak knees. "Make straight paths for your feet, that what is lame may not be disjointed but healed," that what is sinful may be overcome, that what is holy may be embraced.

In the end, when we embrace the discipline of the Lord, we are actually clearing the path towards happiness and fulfillment, not shutting it off. We are freeing ourselves to be more receptive to His love and Grace, making straight the paths to lead us to the loving arms of our Father.