**21st Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C**

**21st August 2022**

**Reading I: Isaiah 66;18-21**

One of the consequences of the Exile was that the Jews became acquainted with a wider world than they had previously known. This led to some of them extending the interests of Yahweh to previously unknown peoples. The Hebrew in this passage is corrupt and the translators have had to resort to conjecture, but the author seems to imagine that an encounter with the glory of the Lord brought death and life to a universal humanity. Those who had survived this theophany will go as far as the known world spreading the word of the Lord. The places mentioned include Southern Spain, the Black Sea coast, Corfu with its islands and North Africa.

The result is a horde of pilgrims in every mode of transport coming to worship the Jewish God in a rebuilt Jerusalem Temple. Some of the Gentiles will even be ordained as priests. The passage shows the influence of Ezekiel (3:23; 11:22-23; 43:1-9) where he predicts that the glory of the Lord will be revealed to all nations. As a result, the pagans will be converted to Judaism and receive a share in Israel's blessings.

This universalist view may also be found in other Biblical writings, such as Jonah, but it must be said that it was a minority opinion generally. However, it was welcomed by Christians as early evidence of hopes that they saw fulfilled in their own time. It illustrates a profound truth that God that though he is international, he nevertheless tends to work through minorities and through those we would not generally expect.

Christian faith sees the fulfilment of these isolated voices partly in the bringing of people from all nations into the Catholic Church, and partly in the future coming of the Son of Man to gather all the nations of the world into his kingdom. (see Luke 13:22-30). It is this hope that is also expressed in to-day’s Gospel reading.

**Responsorial Psalm: 116:1-2**

This psalm, which calls upon all nations to praise the name of Yahweh, is quoted by Paul (Romans 15:11) as one of a string of Old Testament texts to illustrate the universal scope of God's redemptive purpose in Christ. It is an appropriate response to the Old Testament reading, with its migration of all peoples to Jerusalem.

**Reading II: Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13**

This reading has no obvious connection with either of the other two. In them the theme is the universality of the gospel; here it is a positive approach to the disadvantages of being Christians.

This reflects the situation of the author's readers. They were Jews and had adopted Christianity. They have survived until that time when the Roman authorities have just begun to distinguish between Judaism and Christianity. The former had earned, by obstinacy, a tolerance of worship that Gentiles lacked. By the 60s, Christians were beginning to be recognised as different to Jews, and they lost the immunity they had had as a Jewish sect. So the readers of Hebrews are beginning to experience what was possibly the start of institutional persecution but also the petty pinpricks of their non-Christian neighbours.

The overall message for the Christian is that suffering is a necessary ingredient in the building up of a mature Christian person. Suffering may exasperate. It may be unjust. It comes in infinite ways. But it was known to Jesus; it is part of the human condition and it has a constructive as well as a destructive dimension.

**Gospel: Luke 13:22-30**

In this passage various sayings of Jesus which in Matthew are found scattered through his Gospel (7;13-14, 7;22-23, 8;11-12, 19;30, 20;16, 25;10-12) have been brought together by Luke into one place.

Christian theologians are spread along a spectrum between those who expect heaven to be thinly populated and universalists who can see absolutely no-one excluded. Theologians can be found at every point along this spectrum and all can find enough material in the New Testament to convince themselves that they occupy the centre.

This passage, which culminates in the great proclamation that many will come from east and west and take their place in the kingdom of God, begins somewhat unpromisingly. In response to the question whether many or only a few will be saved, Jesus says that many who try to enter will fail. The question 'Sir, will only a few be saved?' - was a topical one and the standard answer was that all Jews would be centre-stage in the future kingdom. Only tax-collectors, Samaritans and suchlike 'sinners,' would be absolutely debarred.

It used to be the classic evangelical challenge of the man in the street, “Are you saved?” to which I recommend the reply, “Yes, I have been saved. I am being saved and I expect to be saved”

One must firmly keep in mind, that, despite all Christian scruples, both ancient and modern, Jesus was and is 'friend of sinners'. Though the question was concerned solely with the salvation of Israel it is still one that Jesus refused to answer directly. Instead, he warned his questioners that an effort is demanded of them: it is no easy matter to lay hold on eternal life (see Matthew 7:13).

The last sentence of the first paragraph in the Missal (v.24) imagines an open door, though a narrow one. Such doors featured in city walls so that with the main gate closed, only one person could be admitted at once, for security. It is just possible to squeeze through though many who try to enter cannot succeed because of unspecified reasons. It is outside our remit to identify what those reasons could be, though that does not stop us trying.

In the second paragraph in the Missal we are dealing no longer with a narrow door but a door that has been intentionally closed by the master of the house, on the occasion of the Messianic banquet. A comparison with Matthew 25:10-11 indicates that the master here is Jesus himself. The Jews had not accepted him, they had not entered into the kingdom while they had the chance; now it is too late, the door is firmly closed. The third paragraph makes clear that simple association is insufficient qualification. What is needed is a positive and early decision. While in Matthew 7:22-23, the rejected ones are nominal Christians, here (Luke 13;26-27) they are still the Jews. (We may remember that Matthew wrote his Gospel for Jewish converts, while Luke wrote his for Gentile ones.) The same material has been used in different circumstances though applicable to both.

It is not enough for them to have eaten with him; they had not accepted him and now they are cast off. Their chagrin will be all the greater when they see not only their own ancestors but the Gentiles too, present at the banquet (fourth paragraph). The final sentence is a familiar secondary conclusion added here in view of the contrast between Gentiles and Jews.

Today's reading strikes a universalist note that is typical of Luke. Men and women from the four corners of the world will share in the messianic kingdom (v. 29) and the Jews will have no advantage over the Gentiles (v. 30). Yet though it is available to all, salvation is not free or even cheap! It cost Jesus his life and it costs us our self-centredness. Only those who follow the path pointed out by Jesus, only those who enter the narrow gate, will gain access to the Kingdom.

Whatever we think about who should be saved and who will be lost, will have no influence on the justice of God. But, whatever our opinion, we should be non-judgemental and prepared to be astonished by those we find amongst our companions in the after-life.