

Twenty-First Sunday day in Ordinary Time C/2016

The readings of this Sunday talk about the importance of salvation. They show that God's salvation is given indiscriminately to all the people. They invite us to strive to abide in God in order to deserve it.

The first reading describes God's promise to the prophet Isaiah to gather all the people of the earth before him. It highlights in particular the return of the sons of Israel together with all the nations in Jerusalem. It also highlights the action of God who will teach those people how to proclaim his glory.

What is behind this text is the idea that God is not exclusive of some people. There is also the idea that salvation is universal. The last idea is related to the truth that the universality of salvation opens the doors to the inclusivity of the service of God.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus talks about what is required in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. First of all, the Gospel starts with mentioning Jesus' teachings in towns and villages as he was on his way to Jerusalem. Then, it reports a question they asked him about the number of those who will be saved. After that, it gives Jesus' reaction under the invitation to enter through the narrow gate and the promptitude to enter at the right time.

The Gospel mentions also Jesus' statement about the entering of the kingdom of God as open to all the people of the earth. Finally, the Gospel ends with Jesus' warning about the last who will be first and the first who will be last.

What do we learn from today's readings? Today I want to talk about the universality of salvation. What do I mean by that? Let me explain by telling you a story. In fact, two years ago, I had the chance to make a pilgrimage to Israel. I started from the South in the Desert of Negev where the well of Jacob is. I came east to the Dead Sea and the Jordan River through Jericho and Samaria, in the Palestinian territory. I sojourned in Nazareth and Galilee, crossed North at the border with Lebanon and ended my pilgrimage with Jerusalem and Emmaus.

As I was travelling, I was struck by the number of people from all over the nations and the languages of the earth who came to Jerusalem with the same purpose like me. At the sight of those people, I felt in my heart that it was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah given in the chapter 66 of his book.

If that is true, then there are consequences we have to seriously consider. First, if God has chosen Israel, it is not because they were extraordinary, but rather because of his love and generosity. In fact, God wanted that all the people of the earth see how he treats Israel and come to understand that that is the way he wants to handle them. Therefore, the choice of Israel has a character of exemplarity. In other words, God chose them in order to give us an example.

Such a vision sheds light on the prophecy of Isaiah when God says: "I come to gather nations of every language; they shall come and see my glory. ... [They shall come] to Jerusalem, my holy mountain. ... They shall proclaim my glory among the nations. ... Some of these I will take as priests..."

Second. If God is open to all the nations, it means that his salvation is given to anyone of those who look for him in truth and sincerity whatever might be his nationality, race or language.

Third. Though salvation is given to all the nations, it is not, however, automatic. It is something for which we have to be found trustworthy. That explains the importance of the parable Jesus gives us in the Gospel.

In fact, Jesus invites us to realize that in order to inherit God's kingdom, we have to strive to enter through the narrow gate. The narrow gate stands for renunciation of sins and conversion of heart. That is why he insists that we remain vigilant, lest we become the last after having been the first to know God.

In other words, some efforts are required in order to cross the threshold of God's kingdom. That is why we have to understand, as St Augustine said, that if "God has created us without us, he will not save us without us". In that sense, our consent and cooperation are very important. We have to cooperate with our salvation lest we are one day rejected outside. That time would be a big surprise.

Therefore, this time of ours is a time we have to do something for our salvation. There will be a time where any possibility of turning back will be impossible. We have to take advantage of the present time as God's grace for conversion and reconciliation with him and with our brothers. We have to remember that the time will come where the doors will be locked. At that time everything will be over and history itself will achieve its course.

With all that in mind, it becomes clear that Jesus invites us to take seriously the present situation of our life as an opportunity for conversion. Like those who came late, and to whom the master said that he did not know them, so will there be no excuse for us at the end of time.

By saying this, the point of Jesus is not that we live in fear of the future judgment. What he wants is to warn us so that we make wise decisions now that we still have time. He wants us to react favorably and responsibly to God's love.

If that is the case, it means that in order to be saved, we have to work hard. I believe that is the reason why Jesus did not answer the question asked him as to whether only a few people will be saved. He left the question open. That silence reminds us that what is important is not to know the number of those who enter into God's kingdom, but that of doing everything in order to enter it.

Let us pray, then, that the Lord helps us take advantage of the circumstances of our present life and come close to him. Let us work for our salvation while we still have time in this world. May God give us the grace to persevere in spite of difficulties crossing our life! May God bless you all!

Isaiah 66: 18-21; Hebrews 12: 5-7, 11-13; Luke 13: 22-30



Homily Date: August 21, 2016
© 2016 – Fr Felicien I. Mbala, PhD, STD
Contact: www.mbala.org
Document Name: 20160821homily.pdf