

Someone in the crowd asks Jesus, “Lord, will only a few be saved?” This is what the Pharisees taught, that salvation, to be destined for the Kingdom, was reserved to a select few. Specifically they taught that to be saved you had to be Jewish. For only Jews, it was thought, could enter into communion with God. Even God-fearers, the gentiles who had accepted the Jewish faith, would be second class citizens in the Kingdom of God.

For the Jews of the time of Jesus, being saved had everything to do with the people you were born into, your race, and the rituals you observed. You had to observe all 613 commandments of the Mosaic Law as well as all the many rituals which had grown up around them.

But Jesus takes the opportunity to redirect the question. He does not say few will be saved as the Pharisees taught. Nor does He say that everyone will be saved, which is a common error in our own day.

Jesus echoes Isaiah, people will come from East and West, North and South, nations of every language, to recline at the table in the Kingdom of God. And so salvation is not reserved exclusively for the Jews.

He goes on to say that many who ate and drank in His company, in other words, those who followed all the strict dietary laws of the Jews, will be strangers to Him. And so salvation did not depend on following rituals.

This is a harsh rebuke for a people that considered themselves a chosen race. The words of Jesus must have been very hard for them to hear.

Not only are they told that gentiles, non-Jews, will enjoy a place at the table, but that they themselves, may be last rather than first.

But this is a message we should also take to heart. As Catholics we believe we have the fullness of the Truth. Our brother and sister Christians who are not Catholic have only a portion of the Truth and non-Christians even less. That could lead us to adopt the same attitude as the Pharisees of Jesus' time. We may begin to think that we are the favored children of God and everyone else will sit lower down at the table.

But Jesus makes it clear that we will not be saved because of the faith we are born into or even the faith we have adopted. We will not be saved because we observed all the right rituals at the proper time.

Instead, Jesus tells us to strive to enter the narrow gate. The narrow gate is the difficult path and not all who try will be strong enough to enter.

There is an old English folk song that describes the path to Hell as a broad lane wandering through a vast green field strewn with lilies. The path to Heaven, on the other hand, turns and twists through brambles and thorns. The path of wickedness is very pleasant and attracts many people. The path of righteousness is difficult and dangerous and few even try to follow it.

The narrow gate, the path to Heaven, is a path through the twists and turns of our hearts. We take this path because of our great love for the

Lord. It is that love, rooted in our hearts, that will determine whether or not we will be saved. Not the race we were born into and not the rituals we observe.

In the parable Jesus tells, there are those who complain that they are excluded from the Heavenly banquet. After all, the Lord taught in their streets. But these are the people that do not even try to enter the narrow way and fight the thorns and briars. These are strangers to the Lord. He does not know where they are from. They may have let Him into their streets, but they did not let Him into their hearts.

Many if not all of us have seen images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It is usually represented as a heart on fire with love for us but also pierced by thorns. When Jesus revealed His Sacred Heart to Saint Margueritte Marie Alacoque, He explained that His love for us was so great that whenever anyone rejected that love or ignored it, it was as painful to Him as if someone were driving a thorn into His physical heart.

St. Margueritte was privileged to receive a series of visions from Our Lord. During one of them she asked Jesus a very interesting question. She asked Him to tell her who, among His followers in the world, at that moment, brought the greatest joy to His heart?

Given how Jesus answers questions in scriptures you might expect a cryptic response. But in this case He did give a direct answer. He did not mention any of the famous preachers, or bishops, or even the pope. He did not mention any of the great intellectuals, theologians, or

missionaries. He didn't even mention someone who would later be recognized by the Church as a saint.

Our Lord told Saint Margueritte that the person giving His heart the most joy at that moment was a little known novice instructor in a small convent, in the European countryside. This was someone who was instructing novices how to become good followers of Christ.

We all want to be good followers of Christ, but we can also be easily distracted by the events happening in the world. We can become very frustrated over the state of our country, the state of our Church, and the character of our leaders. We may dream about doing great things that will affect positive change. But our country and our Church has survived much worse than what we are going through now.

What matters is not the drama or fireworks of great achievements. What matters most to Christ is the humility and love that is within our hearts.

Saint Teresa of Calcutta once said, "If you try, you will find it impossible to do one great thing. You can only do many small things with great love."

One of the most difficult commands that Jesus gave us is, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged." These days it seems that more than ever people give us a reason to think badly of them. We tend to think ill of strangers who we perceive to be rude or insensitive. We assume things about the character of our leaders when they make decisions we do not

agree with. But in truth, we do not know that person or what they may be going through. It is not for us to pass judgement on others because we cannot see into their hearts. Only God can do that.

Only God can see the human heart and know it completely. Only God knows all of the experiences, trials, sorrows and joys, that have gone into the formation of someone's personality. Only God knows all the hidden motives, the real reasons, and the mixed intentions behind human behavior.

For over a hundred years psychologists and sociologists have been trying to analyze and catalog those things that govern our behavior. And after all that study they have come to one conclusion, the human heart is an unfathomable mystery.

All of us want to follow Christ more closely, that is why we are here. And God wants us to be closer to Him. The entire history of our relationship with God is a history of God's attempt to bring us back to the state we enjoyed when He first created man and woman. God wants us to be able to walk with Him once more in the garden of the Kingdom of Heaven. That is why He created us.

To follow Christ means to walk in His footsteps. To follow Him so closely that we are absorbed into His life. How did Jesus respond to those who hurt Him or chose not to follow Him? He warned them, instructed them, encouraged them, and rebuked them. And when His hypocritical, self-centered, arrogant enemies nailed him to a cross, He

did not condemn them as sinners bound for the darkness. Instead He prayed, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do."

If we are to follow Christ should we not do the same? We profess this intent every time we recite the Our Father. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We promise to forgive our neighbors just as we want God to forgive us.

At the end of all things what will matter is a matter of heart. The sacred heart of Jesus will reach out to ours. Will He find a warm welcome?