

All of us want to go to heaven. All of us want to be saved. In the gospel today when Jesus is asked 'will only a few people be saved?' he does not answer with a 'yes' or 'no'. Rather he invites people to enter the narrow gate. What does he mean? Well, the opening of today's gospel gives us the key to understand Jesus' answer. In the time of Jesus, the Jewish religious authorities believed only the Jewish people would be saved and that too those who practice the rituals meticulously. In our culture, the prevailing view is just the opposite. It says that most people are nice guys, so most people will get to heaven. But what does Jesus say?

- He doesn't say, "Only a few will be saved," as the Pharisees taught. Neither does he say only one religious group will be saved. He said, "People from the East and West will enter the kingdom of God.
- Nor does he say, "Many will be saved," as today's popular culture teaches.
- Instead, he changes the focus from general statistics to the individual responsibility. he is answering a more important question, "**How can I be saved?**"
- We might think that Jesus was giving us a new teaching in this regard but the first reading today from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah says that the Lord will come to gather the nations of every language. And he is not talking just about Israelites. The Good News of today's gospel is that God wants all people to be saved, irrespective of religious labels. Anyone who acts in a loving manner, following his/her conscience and guided by the Spirit even if not formally acknowledged will be part of God's kingdom.

"Strive to enter by the narrow gate." the narrow door is symbolic of the hardships of life for those who follow Jesus. It is not enough to have a superficial knowledge of Christ - like the people who said, "We ate and drank in your company, and you taught in our streets." Rather, we must have a living, lasting, growing friendship with Christ. That is what we were created for, and that is what will lead us to true life. And since friendship always involves effort, self-sacrifice, and the investment of time and energy, the same thing goes for our friendship with Christ. Salvation comes from following him, from striving to know him better and live out his teaching.

The little parable that follows uses the image of a door. The master has locked the door and people come along and ask that the door be opened to allow them in. Twice the master replies that he does not know where they come from. But they claim that they ate and drank in his company, and he taught in their streets. Obviously, that is not enough. In the gospel of Matthew Jesus says, 'Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of my Father but he/she who does the will of my Father in heaven'.

When we visit the Holy Land, the two most important holy sites are the Church of Nativity and the Church of Holy Sepulchral. In both these shrines one must crawl on one's knees

to enter in. The gate is narrow and only one at a time can enter the most holy spot. To get through a narrow gate you must leave behind all your excess baggage - you must go through it alone.

A few years ago, a more personal form of the question posed in today's gospel was put to Pope Francis during a question-and-answer session with youngsters in one of Rome's parishes. A young boy, Emmanuel, wanted to know if his recently deceased dad, an unbeliever, was in Heaven. When the time came for him to pose his question to the Pope, the boy burst into tears and couldn't speak. Pope Francis called him to come close to him and whisper his question in his ear. When he came the Pope embraced him with their heads touching, the Pope and the boy spoke privately to each other before Emmanuel returned to his seat.

Then, Pope Francis, with the boy's consent, shared his question with the audience. This is what the boy said: *'A little while ago my father passed away. He was a non-believer who had all four of his children baptized. He was a good man. Is dad in heaven?'* *'God is the one who says who goes to heaven,'* the pope explained. He then asked the children to think about what God is like and, especially, what kind of heart God has: *'What do you think? God has a dad's heart. And with a dad who was not a believer, but who baptized his children and was a good man, do you think God would be able to leave him far from himself? Does God abandon his children when they are good?'* The children shouted, *'No.'* *'There, Emmanuel, that is the answer,'* the pope told the boy. *'God was surely proud of your dad, and you should be too, because he was a good man who wanted what was best for his children.'*

As Pope Francis reminds us, we should leave it to God the question of who will go to Heaven. It's not a question for us to answer. What should concern us is what God wants from us? What gateway is he setting before us?

God passionately wants us all to be in his kingdom. Jesus tells us not to worry, that in his Father's house there are many mansions. There is enough room for us all. But we can refuse the invitation to enter. If we truly appreciate God's incredible love for us, we will try to follow him closely. It is the best way of saying 'thank you' to him for his call and choice of us.

God Bless You.