

The 21st Sunday of Year C: The Kingdom: Who's in and who's out?
First Reading: Isaiah 66:18-21: will invite all peoples of all languages;
Second Reading: Hebr 12:5-7+11-13: Present hurts lead to future benefit;
Gospel: Luke 13:22-30: Our decisions now will affect our future.

I remember talking to an elderly parishioner 30 years ago at Consett – the centre of North-West Durham's very traditional Catholicism. She said: "The Catholic Church seems a very hard one to live in, but a very easy one to die in." I wasn't sure whether she meant this positively or negatively! The idea seems to be based on two sentences from this Sunday's readings: "Any punishment is most painful & far from pleasant....but later, it bears fruit in peace & goodness." (Hebrews 12:11). "Try your best to enter by the narrow door, because, I tell you, many will try to enter and not succeed." (Jesus, in Luke 13: 24). It implies that the harder (or stricter) life is in this world, the happier it will be in the next.

Like many of you reading this, my own experience of RC education (1950's-60's) bore this out. Primary school was not a bundle of fun, and the atmosphere at Grammar School was also very strict. Even in my first two years in the senior seminary at Ushaw College, life was rigorously rule-based, with an all-day fixed timetable up to 'lights out' at 10.15pm. After I was 20, things eased. I am sure many older readers will have had similar experiences. The questions arise: was this system a good thing? Why did Church think it had to change so much? Have those changes made the Church stronger or weaker?

I'll begin with the first reading - part of the final chapter of the Book of Isaiah. The language may strike many of us as odd, but it is quite revolutionary: the writer looked forward to a time when God would allow "the nations" to witness his glory. This would have shocked Jewish readers, who saw themselves as having a monopoly of God's love. Worse still, these foreigners would arrive in Jerusalem, "bringing oblations in clean vessels to the temple of the Lord, and some of them would become priests". To most religious Jews, this would have been heresy, as they defined moral goodness in terms of NOT being foreigners. So, to allow those people to offer sacrifice was unthinkable.

This attack on exclusivity was taken up by Jesus in the gospel. During his long journey to Jerusalem, he was asked about the number of people likely to be saved. Jesus' reply was in terms of "entering the Kingdom" – meaning accepting God's influence in this world, so as to gain heaven in the next. He would not give a precise mathematical answer, but he mentioned that we should

try to “enter by the narrow door” (as stated in the first paragraph). He meant that we cannot take religion casually – it needs some serious effort. The result: many people would try to enter, but would fail. He then said that the opportunity to enter would not last indefinitely – the door would eventually close – and many people who thought they had a right to be on the “inside” would, instead, find themselves locked out. Even those who felt they had some acquaintance with Jesus (“We once ate and drank in your company; you taught in our streets.”) would be excluded. This would have annoyed most Jews who heard it.

But it got worse: stuck on the outside, they would have to watch their great Old Testament heroes (Abraham, the prophets, etc) in God’s Kingdom, along with “men from east & west; from north & south taking their places at the feast in the Kingdom of God”. Jesus’ hearers would have been aghast at the thought that all these foreigners would have priority in being close to God, while they were shut out. This was Jesus’ nail in the coffin of exclusivity.

The problem is that “exclusivity” is a very attractive idea – to those on the right side of it. My memory of our pre-Vatican II RC Church was that it often felt quite comfy – at least, in the sense of us being “right”, “on the inside”, “not like the others”, etc. At other times, with a super-strict moral code, it was anything but ‘comfy’ – as that old lady had said in the first paragraph. The fact was that, in the 1960’s, the Vatican II bishops, who were themselves classic products of that old sort of Catholicism, felt that it had to change. They took on board the ideas in the first reading and gospel, and voted to make the Church more open to the modern world, and less “exclusive”, seeing it as “a pilgrim people”, not a private members’ club with all the answers. They took a big risk.

The problem was this: in opening the Church to modern influence, the risk lay in losing what was valuable from the past – especially in the liturgy. I fear this did happen - some priests abandoned a lot of the sense of the “holy” in church services, so that the Mass became a sort of pop concert. We’ve all seen the reaction – some Catholics (including young priests and laypeople) wanting to return to an old system they never knew, but feel had to be better than what we now have. I’ve some sympathy, but a limited amount. We cannot ignore Jesus in the gospel: religious membership must be open to all, with belief & commitment mattering more than simple affiliation to a group. While culture & liturgy do count, what matters more is what we believe & how we behave. They are the ultimate rules for membership of God’s Kingdom. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

