

Twenty-first Sunday Ordinary Time Yr. C

August 25, 2019 by Father Scarcella

Our Lord was deeply disturbed by the attitudes of many Jews of his day. At times he said some angry things. He shocked several by stating outright that outsiders could inherit the kingdom of God, while among the Jews there would be “wailing and gnashing of teeth.” Others will be first, and you will be last. This is tough talk!

However, our Lord was making every effort to bring his people back to a correct attitude, back to a grasp of their original mission. Be that as it may, as Jesus lashed out at twisted attitudes, a battleground emerged. It was ultimately this fight that led Jesus to Calvary and the cross.

What were the “attitudes” that Jesus was denouncing? They can be reduced to three: ritualism, legalism, and xenophobia. Where did this come from?

To go back for a minute to the historical record, it is clear that by the year 1000 BC, by the time of the kings David and Solomon, the various tribes came to be merged into a united kingdom. Jerusalem was the capital city. In Jerusalem was built a temple. And there was one king. They had it all, as it were. But the erosion of disunity was soon at work.

In 722 BC, “Israel,” the domain of the northern tribes was conquered by the vicious Assyrians. By 587 BC, “Judah,” the domain of the southern tribes, was overrun by the Babylonian invaders.

They had it all, and now they lost it all. The bitterness of exile brought thoughtful prayer and hope. How did this happen to us, they asked. How can we prevent it happening again?

When, through the unexpected largesse of the Persian emperor, Cyrus, who emerged as a conquering ruler bent on uniting his diverse lands, the Israelites were restored to their land. Now the Jews, given a second chance, could answer those questions with some new solutions.

And they tended from the 5th century onwards to hit on the right answers, but they went too far. What the Lord wanted from them, and what they ended up doing, however, did not coincide:

- (A) Be faithful to temple worship. The Lord wanted sacrifices, yes, but offered from the depths of their hearts with generosity. But they ended up slaves to ritualism: a rigid, intolerant attention to exact, external observances. Some have described this as a “slot-machine” religion;
- (B) The Lord expected a faithfulness to the law because it provides justice, the protection of rights. Instead there entered a blind legalism, an uncomprehending harshness, a severity of spirit that focused on petty attention to details and minutiae; and,
- (C) The Lord expected them to maintain their identity as faithful Jews, secure in the knowledge that they had a divine mission to bright God’s light to all the world. Instead they became crabbed xenophobes, mistrusting and despising all non-Jews

The Lord wanted his people to live out with joy his teaching: let us worship the Lord with joy and largesse of spirit, let us love the law of God that liberates, let us embrace all.

But, alas, the Jews convinced themselves that they had a monopoly on God's love, that the gentiles had very little chance for salvation or for sharing in God's kingdom.

And so, among those who questioned Jesus, were those who insisted on assuring themselves that only a few people will be saved. They even demanded to know how many people will be saved. But Jesus turned the tables in his responses. Jesus is bent on shedding light, on restoring his people to God's way of thinking, not theirs. He wishes to have them recover correct attitudes.

So "strive to enter through the narrow door – the door that leads to eternal life." not through any door, but through the Lord's door – not just the easy one. The easy path will take you to profound unhappiness. Our Lord makes clear that this requires effort, hard work on our part. We will have to combat our selfishness and pride. To us Catholics, Jesus stresses the need for prayer, for the worship of the mass, for largesse of spirit, to pray for and forgive those who have wronged us, to lift up the neglected and the poor, to protect life rather than abort it, to live by the laws the Lord has given us. All that and more in the largesse of the holy spirit.

And with the assurance that comes from Jesus in the Holy Spirit that if and when we fail, we must turn to the Lord who is a God of mercy who forgives those who come with a spirit of repentance and humility.

Yes, there is some "tough talk" in all this. And we might be inclined at times to wonder - like the Jews who wanted to know if we can be saved and how many will be saved. Perhaps the answer to this may be found in St. John's book of Revelation, Chapter 7 verses 9-17. From this mystical insight into the final judgment, does it now appear that the Lord's largesse is astoundingly greater than we may have imagined?