

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
(Aug. 26, 2007)

Jesus says, “Try to come in through the narrow door.” Well, once we get to that narrow door, what will be waiting for us on the other side? In other words, what is heaven like? That’s a question we would all like to have answered, wouldn’t we? In the Gospel passage we just heard, Jesus actually gives some indication of what heaven will be like. He speaks as usual in homely pictures. There will be feasting; we will meet with our ancestors; and there will be some surprises.

There will be feasting. That’s not a new idea with Jesus. Isaiah the prophet had said the same thing. He had said that there would be abundance of food and drink and all the world would come to God’s holy mountain to live in peace and happiness where there would be no more war, not even preparation for war. It was a beautiful picture and Jesus picks it up to describe heaven in other places as a wedding feast or a great banquet. Everyone who comes through that narrow door will enjoy all that a feast conjures up: good company, relaxation, satisfaction, the mood of celebration. All in all a wonderful time to be had by all.

Then we will be with our ancestors. The people Jesus was talking to had a strong sense of ancestry and so he offers them the very appealing picture of meeting up with their great ancestors in the faith, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the prophets. It offers us the hope of meeting again our own departed family and friends as well as our forebears who passed on to us the gifts of life and faith down through the centuries. I don’t know about you but I look forward to meeting many of these people. I find it exciting to think I’ll be able to talk with Plato and Aristotle, St. Augustine and Shakespeare, and of course, Jesus and his mother Mary and our patron, Saint Joseph. I can’t wait to see St. Ignatius the founder of our Jesuit order. I have questions for all of them and it will probably take all eternity just to listen to them all and enjoy what they have to say.

But then there is that third picture. Jesus tells us there will be some surprises there. We may find ourselves sitting down at that heavenly banquet next to people we never expected to see, and on the other hand there may be some who do not make it through that narrow door. What

Jesus says is not a threat. It's a warning. He tells us not to be complacent, not to be too sure of ourselves, and particularly not to judge others. God alone can read the heart and the deepest motives of the mind. God alone can perfectly judge the response we have made to the graces offered and the difficult circumstances that had to be overcome. Many who seem to be first in their manifestation of piety and church-going may be far back in the line when it comes to genuine charity – and charity is the only question in the final test. Love of neighbor.

And we know, don't we, what the questions will be to see if we qualify to go through that narrow door, to get our passport to heaven, as it were. God is not going to ask us about our sex life or any of those things that seem to preoccupy us in this culture. God isn't even going to ask us how often we missed Mass on Sunday. Instead the questions we will hear will go something like this: Did you feed the hungry? Did you give drink to the thirsty? Did you clothe the naked? Did you take in the ones you saw sleeping on the street? Did you visit the imprisoned? Those are the questions we will be asked. And we know that, don't we? The problem is we tend to get things mixed up. And that's why we hear those words of warning, "Some who are last will be first and some who are first will be last." Again, not a threat, just a warning.

But it's a warning that should not upset us or make us sad or worried. Jesus wants us to live a life that is full and happy, investing all we have in this human life of ours and that of others, living soberly and simply, generously and carefully, but above all living! That's what Jesus did on his way to Jerusalem, walking that narrow road, the road less traveled, to that narrow gate of the cross and to the life and the glory to follow. And he invites us to come along.