

Luke 13:22-30

²² He passed through towns and villages, teaching as he went and making his way to Jerusalem. ²³ Someone asked him, “Lord, will only a few people be saved?” He answered them, ²⁴ “Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough. ²⁵ After the master of the house has arisen and locked the door, then will you stand outside knocking and saying, ‘Lord, open the door for us.’ He will say to you in reply, ‘I do not know where you are from.’ ²⁶ And you will say, ‘We ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets.’ ²⁷ Then he will say to you, ‘I do not know where (you) are from. Depart from me, all you evildoers!’ ²⁸ And there will be wailing and grinding of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you yourselves cast out. ²⁹ And people will come from the east and the west and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God. ³⁰ For behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

Context

In the liturgical readings of Year C the Sunday cycle of the summer months moves from 12:49-53 (20th Sunday) to this gospel, passing over 12:54-13:21. The emphases of these verses are:

- the call to read the signs of the time and judge correctly,
- the surety of the full measure of judgment
- the parable of the fig tree and the mustard seed (parables of the kingdom)

The sayings this gospel of Jesus follow upon the parables of the kingdom (Luke 13:18–21) and stress that great effort is required for entrance into the kingdom (Luke 13:24) and that there is an urgency to accept the present opportunity to enter because the narrow door will not remain open indefinitely. Lying behind the sayings is the rejection of Jesus and his message by his Jewish contemporaries whose places at table in the kingdom will be taken by Gentiles from the four corners of the world. Those called last (the Gentiles) will precede those to whom the invitation to enter was first extended (the Jews).

The parable for this Sunday seems a contradiction of the one Jesus told only two chapters ago in Luke’s Gospel (17th Sunday of the year). The question there was: if we ask, will we receive? Is there a difference between the asking (11:1-13) and the asking for admittance to the banquet in our text (13:25 ff.)?

Commentary

This section continues Jesus’ formation of his disciples for their time to take up the mission of the proclamation of the kingdom of God. Jesus makes several references to the seriousness of the proclamation of God’s reign and to the need for a sober decision of discipleship to undertake the journey to Jerusalem with Jesus, a journey that will end in suffering and death (9:22–23).

“Lord, will only a few people be saved?”

It has been quipped that most young people are said to believe in a hell where nobody goes. Among the middle aged there are those who think hell largely populated by enemies. And among the old are believers who nervously wonder if hell might be populated by the likes of themselves.

They, like St. Paul at some moments, consider the question of their salvation “in fear and trembling.”

The gospel text continues to indicate that the time is short, the kingdom is arriving even now, and thus it is important that a decision be made. Jesus' parable of the narrow and soon shut door makes it clear that making a decision, and the right one, is crucial. The question was relevant in Jesus' time when there was a growing divergence of religious views. There is evidence that it was widely discussed (e.g. 4 Ezra 7:55ff.), and that the rabbis held widely differing views (e.g. *Sanhedrin* 97b). But it seems to have been firmly held that all Israel would be saved, except for a few blatant sinners who excluded themselves (*Sanhedrin* 10:1).

In our day, this same question speaks not only the individual decision, but also to the proclamation of the community. Here at the beginning of the third millennium, especially in the West, many people believe that there are many ways to God – perhaps. Jesus does not answer directly, but urges his questioner and others (“*Strive*” is plural) to make sure that they are in the number, however large or small it proves to be (v.24). The word “strive” is derived from a technical term for competing in the ancient Olympiad pointing to a full-hearted effort. This word is in the present and contrasts to comparison to those who “*will attempt to enter*” but when the door of opportunity is finally shut it will be too late (v.25). People must strive to enter now. There is inevitably a time-limit on the offer of salvation.

Jesus envisages some of those rejected as pleading that they had known the Lord (v.26). They *ate and drank* where he was; he taught where they were. They cannot claim that they ever entered into compassionate understanding of what he was teaching. There was no acceptance, no response; their response was insincere, if at all. It is a sad case that, in every age, there are people under the illusion that they were following Jesus. While they claim that they ate and drank with him, they fail to understand they had no intimate fellowship; they heard his teaching but did not accept it as the word of God to be put into practice (8:21).

In consequence in the end they will know complete rejection. The householder says that he does not know where they come from and he brands them as *you evildoers* (cf. *Ps. 6:8*). No specific evil deed has been mentioned, but in the end there will be only two classes, those inside and those outside. Since these people did not take the necessary steps to get inside, they are to be numbered with the evildoers outside.

Rejection means weeping and gnashing of teeth, the pain that comes from knowing one has been excluded from blessing (Mt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). Contrary to some popular perceptions of God, he can and will say no. Those on the outside will see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and then know that God has, in every age, provided his Word of salvation – but in these last days has given us a Son. The pericope warns us not to assume membership in the kingdom on the basis of knowledge of Jesus, attendance at church, or on the basis of elect ethnic origin. The patriarchs of Judaism will be there, but that does not mean every physical descendant of Abraham will. Only the true spiritual descendants of Abraham will be at the banquet.

There is another surprise: people will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. This means that all the nations will be blessed at God's table. The blessed of God will come from everywhere (cf. Isa. 45:6; 49:12). The disciples did not immediately grasp this truth and its implications. The special vision of Acts 10 was needed to reveal how it would work. Even though Israel has a special place in God's plan, others

are not excluded from blessing. We all have equal access to God's blessing through Jesus (Eph 2:11-22). Even the promise to Abraham stressed how the world would eventually be blessed through the patriarch's seed (Gen 12:1-3).

So Jesus closes his words of warning with a note of eschatological reversal. Expectations are overturned as there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last. Many will get to the table, including some surprises. All are on the same footing. In today's context the warning of this passage might be that those who are first (who have exposure to Christ through attendance at the church) may turn out to be last (excluded from blessing) if they do not personally receiving what Jesus offers through the community. Simply put, Jesus is the key to the door of salvation

Luke's Gentile audience would listen eagerly to these words, but they would also be challenged not to take for granted themselves their eating and drinking with Jesus at the Eucharist. The pronouncement closing this speech guards against both presumption and despair; as long as the journey is underway, some may fall away and others may still join.

Reflection

The question at the beginning was: if we ask, will we receive? Is there a difference between the asking (11:1-13) and the asking for admittance to the banquet in our text (13:25 *ff.*)? I would suggest that the difference is that in Luke 11, one is asking a friend. In Luke 13 one is asking from someone that the petitioner does not really know – even though there has been a life-long call to the banquet. We are called to strive, full heartedly, not as a result of action, but of desire. We are called to hold back nothing of ourselves for ourselves, but rather to give ourselves completely to the One who gave Himself completely for us (*St. Francis of Assisi, 2nd Letter to the Faithful*) – such is the nature of the friendship of salvation.

Notes

Luke 13:23 *saved*: The Greek contains the present participle which means “being saved” (present progressive) is the more technically correct translation.

sōzō [to save], *sōtēria* [salvation], *sōtēr* [savior]. In the LXX *sōzō* is used to translate the words of the Hebrew stem *yš'* (“to save,” “to help,” “to free”). This verb first means “to be roomy.” Bringing into a more spacious place confers the idea of deliverance. A stronger being brings deliverance to the weak or oppressed by superior intervention. Personal relationships are stressed as there is rescue from situations brought about by the hostile intent of others. All salvation that is not divinely validated is limited. Idols and astrologers cannot save (Is. 45:20; 47:13). God, not an angel, rescues from Egypt, brings into the land, and wins victories over enemies (Is. 63:8-9; Ps. 44:3-4; Judg. 7:2, 7). The people must wait on God for salvation (Is. 30:15). It is a sin to reject the God who saves and to seek a king (1 Sam. 10:18-19) or to avenge oneself (25:26ff.). Human intervention is legitimate only if God works in and through it, as in the case of the judges (Judg. 2:18). God also helps and saves directly as the one best equipped to intervene or protect or preserve. He is the true hero and king (Pss. 80:2; 44:3-4). Israel conquers through him (Dt. 33:29). He saves and helps her (1 Sam. 11:13). If she is faithful, he promises aid (Num. 10:19). He is the hero who brings victory (Zeph. 3:17). In the Psalms God's help is thus invoked against public or personal foes. He is asked to save against legal attacks, against injustice and violence, against sickness and imprisonment, and against external attacks. There are also references to

comprehensive deliverance or salvation. God has established and preserved the people, and its members may thus hope for his help (Ps. 106:4). By forgiveness the garment of salvation replaces their filthy raiment of sin (Is. 61:10; Zech. 3:4-5). They can thus raise the cup of salvation (Ps. 116:13). To the humble who know their littleness, call on God with contrite hearts, and follow his will (Pss. 24:5; 34:6; 119:155), God grants his general help and salvation. Although he denies help to sinners, salvation may at times be from merited judgment. He rescues the oppressed even though they, too, are sinful (Ezek. 34:22), and he frees Israel from all her sins (Ezek. 36:29). Repentance is a prerequisite (Jer. 4:14). The liberation from exile is a form of salvation (Is. 45:17). God alone can effect this (43:11). This redemption points ahead to the final redemption when the age of eschatological salvation dawns (*cf.* Is. 43:1ff.; 60:16; 63:9). The Hebrew stem covers both the deliverance itself and the salvation that it brings. The eschatological deliverance includes rescue from attacking nations (Zech. 12:7) and the gathering of the dispersed (Is. 43:5ff.). The end-time community will draw on the wells of salvation (Is. 12:3), and all the world can share its salvation (45:22). The messianic ruler, as God's representative, will help Israel so that it may dwell in safety (Jer. 23:6), and he will himself be divinely preserved in the wild eschatological attack of the nations (Zech. 9:9).

More strictly religious is the use in Lk. 1:68ff., which follows an OT model. In 1:77 the Baptist will give knowledge of salvation in the remission of sins. The explanation of the name of Jesus in Mt. 1:21 makes a similar link. Elsewhere the group is not common in the Synoptists. Mk. 8:35 and parallels refer to the saving and losing of life with an eschatological reference. In Mk. 10:26 being saved is equivalent to entering the kingdom or entering or inheriting life. Mk. 13:13 and parallels speak of deliverance from messianic tribulation. Lk. 13:23 equates salvation with entering the kingdom. In Lk. 19:10 saving and finding take place in the present (*cf.* 19:9-10). *sōtēria*, then, has both a present reference as finding and a future reference as entering the kingdom. [TDNT 1133-35]

will only a few be saved?: In his discussion of the question of how many will share in the salvation promised in the kingdom (13:22–30), Jesus asserts that entry into the kingdom depends on the master of the house, who is indirectly identified in 13:26 as Jesus himself. The question in 13:23 has no parallel in the OT but was often addressed in Second Temple Judaism; note *4 Ezra* 8:1: “The Most High made this world for the sake of many, but the world to come for the sake of few” (see also *4 Ezra* 7:47; 9:15). Isaiah 37:32, a text that is sometimes referred to in this context, speaks of a “remnant” and a “band of survivors” who shall go out from Jerusalem, but the context in Isa. 37 is limited to a temporary restoration of fortunes for Jerusalem.

Luke 13:24 *Strive to enter*: Greek (*agonizomai*), suggests great labor and struggle in the effort to get through the door. The verb is used in other contexts of an athlete in training (1 Cor 9:25).

Luke 13:25 *arisen and locked the door*: This recalls the image from Matthew 25:10-12 (parable of the foolish virgins). In Luke there are two terms used for “rise” – *anistēmi* for the sense of rising in order to accomplish something (*cf.* 1:39; 4:29; 6:8) – and *egeirō* for “rise up” which is the term Luke uses here and for the prediction of the resurrection (9:22). Is this then an intentional allegory?

Luke 13:27 *I do not know where (you) are from*: The answer given to those who stand outside the door appealing to the householder as contemporaries who shared food with him and who listened to his teaching, has two parts, both containing OT allusions. The statement in 13:27a, “I do not know where you come from,” recalls OT passages that speak of people being known by

God (Jer. 1:5; Hos. 5:3; 13:5; Amos 3:2)—that is, people who are chosen by God (cf. Ps. 138:6). The second part, ‘*Depart from me, all you evildoers!*’ alludes to Ps. 6:8 (6:9 LXX), “*Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping,*” to emphasize not only that Jesus does not know them, but also that he positively excludes them.

Luke 13:28-29 when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God...at table in the kingdom of God: The image of the joyous banquet of the kingdom echoes OT passages that describe, first, a gathering of Israel from all corners of the earth (Ps. 107:2–3; Isa. 43:5–6; 49:12; Zech. 2:10 LXX); second, the worship of Yahweh by the Gentiles (Isa. 45:6; 59:19; Mal. 1:11); and third, the eschaton as a great banquet (Isa. 25:6–8; 55:1–2; 65:13–14; Zeph. 1:7).

Luke 13:28 wailing and grinding of teeth: This corresponds to the woe in 6:25, *penthesete kai kalusete*, “you will mourn and weep.” The expression found in this verse is more common in Matthew (Mt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13’ 24:51; 25:30) but found only here in Luke. The “gnashing of teeth” appears in the LXX as an expression of hatred (Job 16:9; Ps. 34:16; 36:12; 112:10; Lam. 2:16), here resembling Ps. 112:10 (111:10 LXX) more closely: “The wicked see it and are angry; they gnash their teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.”

Luke 13:29 from the east and the west: The ingathering of the people in a prophetic motif (see Isaiah 11:11-16; 60:1-22) which Luke refers to in Act 2:5-13.

will recline: this is the image/posture of the banquet

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