

Homily
21OrdC
August 24/25, 2019
St Bernard Church
Deacon Tim Sullivan

Who Will Be Saved?

The basic question raised by today's readings from the Bible is "Who will be saved?"

My oldest daughter, when she was a student at TU, was studying in the college library late one night. This daughter had been a student in Catholic schools from kindergarten through high school. Well, when she left the library, a nice young man, a fellow student, volunteered to walk her to her car.

When they got to my daughter's car, the young man asked my daughter if she had been saved. When my daughter told me about this, she said to me, "Dad, what should I have told him?"

Living in the Bible Belt, as we do in Tulsa, means we are going to be asked by Protestant people we know, or not, whether we have been saved.

People who study such things report that that the majority of Catholics are not concerned about salvation. That must mean that many of us take salvation for granted.

Tonight's Gospel about entering through the narrow gate warns us that we need to be thoughtful and vigilant about the issue of our salvation. Will I be saved? Will those who are important to me be saved? What am I doing to help others obtain their salvation?

The question of who will be saved has caused a lot of confusion in the history of Christianity.

The whole Protestant Reformation began in the 16th century when Martin Luther decided that Christians are saved solely by faith in Jesus Christ. In his opinion, works, or actions, are not necessary for salvation.

Luther's decision was supported in part by a couple of passages from the Letter to the Romans in the Bible.

So, for example, it says in Romans 10:9: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the death, you will be saved."

In reliance on this one passage, the young man who escorted my daughter to her car that night, and many other Protestants, believe that a Christian is saved at the moment he or she professes belief in Jesus Christ and accepts Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior.

The problem with Luther's idea that we are saved by faith alone is that it is clearly refuted by other passages in the Bible. As Catholics, we don't interpret the Bible by isolating on a single verse. We look at all the passages that address the same issue.

The author of the Letter of James in the Bible points out that even the demons believe that Jesus is the Son of God. James says, and I'm quoting, "Faith without works is useless. Faith without works is dead" His point is that our faith has to be backed up by our actions.

In Chapter 7 of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus himself says, "Everyone who listens to these words of mine but does not act on them will be like a fool who built his house on sand." The rains will come, the winds will blow, the house will collapse and be completely ruined.

The best statement in the Bible of the Catholic understanding of salvation is in the Letter to the Ephesians. In Chapter 2, verse 8: St. Paul tells us:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God."

We do not earn our way to heaven. Yes, our faith has to be backed up by our works, by our actions, but we can only be saved through the grace of God.

This raises questions about grace. What is grace? And how can we get it?

Grace is the free and undeserved gift that God gives us that enables us to share in His divine life, the life that He shares with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Grace helps us to know and follow God's will for our lives.

How do we get grace from God? I'm going to focus on two basic answers.

The first answer is that we have to realize that the only way we can get to heaven is through the gift of the suffering and death of Jesus. He IS our personal Lord and Savior. None of us, no matter how "good" we are in this life, will deserve to spend eternity experiencing the bliss of heaven. It is Jesus who, by His sacrifices, atones for our sins and opens the doors to heaven for us.

We have to meditate upon Jesus dying on the Cross for us, realizing that He would do this for each of us even if we were the only person on the face of the earth, so great is His love for us and for every human being.

When we do this, we develop a deep and personal love for Jesus. We want to make Him the center of our lives, realizing that all that is good comes from our relationship with Him. When we make this humble act of belief, commitment and surrender, we become available to receive the graces God wants to give us.

The second answer is related to the first answer. Jesus says in John 10:10, "I came that they would have life, and have it more abundantly." The abundant life that Jesus speaks about is a life in which we experience on a regular basis the divine, supernatural power that He shares with the Father and Holy Spirit.

When we fully commit our life to Jesus, we become open and available to do God's will, not our own will, in every aspect of our lives. When we do this, we discover a new power active in our lives. Just like in the Acts of the Apostles in the Bible, the Holy Spirit brings people in our lives for a specific and holy purpose. We become aware of God's presence in every moment of our daily lives.

And just like in the Acts of the Apostles, the power of the Holy Spirit is given to us to do what God wants us to do. The power to discern God's specific will for our lives, the power to share our faith effectively with others, the power of prayer, the power of healing, the power to overcome any challenge we have to face.

St. Paul says in his Letter to the Galatians, "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me. I live now...by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me."

Through grace, we experience a new reality, that God is present and active in our lives, all the time, 24/7. We realize that, by surrendering to God and acknowledging our total dependence on Him, we actually become the person we were always intended to be.

When we are living the kind of life I am describing, we cannot help but fall even more in love with Jesus, His Father and the Holy Spirit. We love God for bringing us into the world. We love Jesus for His suffering for our sake and for making available to us a life rich and fulfilling beyond our wildest dreams. We love the Holy Spirit for giving us the power to live up to our commitment to love and follow Jesus. And we love the entire Trinity for the graces they give us that make our lives exciting adventures that are far better, far richer, far more fulfilling, than the lives that, without the Father, Jesus and Holy Spirit, we would have chosen for ourselves.

When we die, and knock on the gates of heaven, and St. Peter calls out to us, "Why should I let you in?," here's one way to answer him. Here's one way to answer the question, "Why should I be saved?"

"Jesus, I tried to live my life trusting in your love, your grace, your truth and your mercy. I love you. I thank you for the graces that your suffering made available to me in my life. I

am not worthy of sharing forever the bliss of being forever in the presence of you, the Father and the Holy Spirit. But there is nothing I want more.”