

Homily for the 21st Sunday of Ordinary Time

“The Call to Holiness”

August 21, 2016

Isaiah 66:18–21

Psalm 117:1, 2

Hebrews 12:5–7, 11–13

Luke 13:22–30¹

The theme that governs our readings for today’s Mass is:

The call to holiness.

What do we mean by the word “holiness”? Look at the Bible. It says, “Holy Bible.” The land of Israel is called “The Holy Land,” and the city of Jerusalem is called “The Holy City.” Why? There is a quality about all three that they share in common. They all belong to God. The Bible is God’s book; Israel is God’s land; Jerusalem is God’s city. They are all God’s property! That is why they are holy; they belong to God.

To grow in holiness is to therefore have a deepening awareness that we belong to God. We are often led to think that holiness is a goal reserved for a few elect. But at Vatican II the Synod Fathers wrote in *Lumen Gentium* – “The call to holiness is universal” And so we want to ask:

What does it mean to be holy?

St Augustine wrote a book called *The City of God*. In this book he describes two kinds of people. The first are those who are unholy. St. Augustine says that such people live with reference only to the earthly city. They live with a love for self even to the contempt of God. Augustine then contrasts this with those who live in this earthly city but are always looking forward to the heavenly city, The City of God. With this perspective people live with a love for God even to the contempt of themselves.

We are called to be a holy people. This is because we are called to desire above all else to become Saints. To desire holiness means that daily we want to grow in virtue so that our lives will ever more be conformed to the life of Jesus. Everything in us that wants to resist this total surrender to God requires a self-contempt so that we desire God more and His will supremely.

As Catholic Christians we celebrate the Communion of Saints. In these people we see lived out love for God even if this meant contempt of themselves. They so completely surrendered themselves to Jesus that with St Paul they could say:

“it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

¹ *Catholic Lectionary*. (2009). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

What does it mean to be holy”? It means to be growing in sanctity, that is, towards becoming saints. To be holy is to let Christ’s light shine through our lives so that love for God allows us to exercise a holy self-contempt.

In our readings we hear that:

1. The call to holiness is to be universal.
2. The call to holiness is to be personal
3. The call to holiness is to be daily.

In the Gospel reading for today a man asks Jesus “will only a few be saved?” Or we could rephrase this and ask: will only a few attain holiness and sainthood?

In St. Paul’s letter to Timothy we read:

God desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.⁵²

That God desires all to be saved, that he desires all to become saints, does not mean this will happen. Jesus tells us a story in Luke where there are those left on the outside of the house, crying to be admitted but they are not.

God’s desire for universal salvation is not only stated clearly by Paul but also in today’s Psalm where we read:

***¹Praise the Lord, all you nations!
Extol him, all you peoples!
²For great is his steadfast love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.
Praise the Lord!***

Who are those who will praise the Lord? The ones who acknowledge his steadfast love and faithfulness. Who are the ones with such awareness? Those who in our reading from Isaiah 66 include the nations.

From them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Put, and Lud—which draw the bow—to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations.

The lands mentioned here include parts of North Africa, Spain, Asia Minor and Greece. Isaiah looks to the day when God’s people – that is those called to holiness - will come from all nations. He also looks forward to that day when the priesthood will no longer be based a Jewish pedigree and the descendants of Aaron. Rather it will be universal with priests taken from the nations.

I will also take some of them as priests and as Levites, says the Lord.

² *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, 1 Ti 2:4–5). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Here we see anticipated hundreds of years before the formation of the Catholic Church mention of a priesthood that is now multi-national. And what are priests for? To be like Christ for they are persona-Christi. And what did Christ come to do? St. Paul tells us clearly in Ephesians 5:

that he (Jesus) might present the Church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish³

He came so that we could grow in holiness and one day be without spot and without blemish. Such a Church and such a priesthood is anticipated in Isaiah.

No longer will people look primarily to blood, that is family, nor to race, that is nationality, as the unifying influence in their lives. Now it will be this universal call to holiness that draws people together into the Church that is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. It is this community Isaiah foreshadows.

Not only is the call universal it is also personal. This is why Jesus in response to the question about how many will be saved, redirected the question so the inquisitor would stop thinking in terms of abstract numbers and think more about his own life. Jesus calls this man to grow in sanctity. Such growth is not easy as Jesus makes clear when he says:

“Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.”

Now I want to highlight this word “strive”. The word in Greek is “*agonizomai*”, from which we get the English word agony. Now there is something very interesting about Greek tenses that is at play here. It is in both the middle tense and the passive tense. The middle tense implies that the subject of the verb is actively doing something. Like “I threw the ball”. But this verb also implies the passive sense when another is acting as in “I received the ball that another person through.”

Now let’s think about this in relation to the verb: *agonizomai*. There are times in our lives where we experience situations that are agonizing because we are the passive subjects of this verb. Think for instance of a time where you have been laid off from a job, where you are dealing with chronic pain, a serious illness, teenage and adult children whose behaviour is very troubling but you cannot control. Think of those times where there is an attitude or behaviour your spouse exhibits that just drives you crazy! Talk about agony! Then think of those areas in your own life where you are wanting to actively grow in sanctity. It might be learning to control your tongue, choosing to grow in purity, overcoming addictions to alcohol, pornography, gambling, illicit drugs, learning to be more patient with your family, learning to receive correction from your spouse and others close to you without becoming reactionary.

³ *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Eph 5:27). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

There are so many other examples I could give. But here is the point. To grow in holiness, to strive to enter through the narrow way is hard because it requires a kind of self-awareness and willingness to persevere through trials that can be agonising that are both active and passive.

To live this way is like trying to go up a down escalator. We are always fighting against the pull of the world that would say serve yourself and be contemptuous of God.

But “no” we say. We do not want to pay lip service to Jesus. For he warns that those who play at being Christian but are really self-absorbed will find themselves on the outside of heaven looking in. We understand that it is only by truly persevering to the end that by the grace of God we will enter the narrow gate and so attain heaven’s banquet.

This grace is offered to us by our loving Father which means that the call to holiness is not only universal, personal it is to be lived out daily. This is the point made in our reading from Hebrews:

Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline?

¹¹ Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

As we continue to live in this world striving to enter through the narrow door will mean we often experience that discipline of paternal correction. Such correction has as its end our holiness, described here as “the peaceful fruit of righteousness”.

Those who know that while we live in this earthly city it is actually the City of God inspiring and shaping us to be a people who know we are called to holiness. A holiness that is universal, personal and to be exercised daily.