

**“Strive to enter through the narrow door”**

***Lk 13:24***

Lifestyle choices. Defined as a choice about how to live and behave, according to one’s attitudes, tastes, and values. Sounds reasonable, doesn’t it? Well, not when it comes to religion.

In today’s first reading we are told that God is coming to gather the nations of every language. Picture it: like some great scene from an old, black-and-white Hollywood, Biblical epic: thousands upon thousands of people on the move towards the Promised Land. Suddenly we are brought up short and told, “strive to enter through the narrow door”. How can so many people squeeze through a single, restricted entrance? Has God somehow changed His mind between the Old Testament and the New? one minute calling everyone together, and the next whittling them down to a group small enough to get through such a confined portal?

First, God does indeed call everyone to a place at the heavenly banquet. Do you remember the old penny catechism? “Why did God make you? God made me to know Him, love Him, and serve Him in this life, and to be happy with Him forever in the next.” That applies to everyone: God made *each* of us so that we might, one day, be happy with Him forever in Heaven. Moreover, God makes enough grace available to each and every one of us as is necessary for our salvation, as St Paul says in his Letter to Titus: “The grace of God, our Saviour, has dawned on all men alike” (Titus 2:11, Knox). No one is excluded from the possibility of salvation; no one is pushed away by God; no one was ever *intended* by God to go to hell.

But if God's grace is being made available to everyone wandering aimlessly up and down along the Buttermarket this morning/evening, why aren't they in Church instead? Good question.

Well, here's the rub. Whilst God makes sufficient grace available to us *all*, we, in turn, must *respond* to that grace if we are to enter Heaven.

St Thomas Aquinas teaches that everyone is looking for happiness all of the time: all of our decisions are designed to lead to greater happiness, or at least less unhappiness. Even acts that lead to harm or destruction are still *intended* by the individual as a way of finding something better than what he has at the moment, some improvement – however slight – in his current condition. But just because everyone is looking for happiness doesn't mean that everyone wants God, or believes that God will be the source of that happiness. Many people *want* to find happiness elsewhere, and this isn't necessarily just because they don't know any better. As we see in the Gospels, and in the world around us, not everyone is attracted by goodness. Don't forget, the people of Israel encountered their God and His goodness again and again, yet they still chose to turn away from Him. They did so, as people today do so, because they looked to their own attitudes, tastes, and values.

A lifestyle choice starts with the preferences of the individual: it is based on what *I* want; it is wholly subjective. Religion, by contrast, is wholly objective because it is focused on objective truths revealed by God; it begins and ends with God, and is necessarily shaped by *His will*, not by my whim.

If I have myself as the starting point of my religious practice – if my attitudes, tastes, and values determine the course of my spiritual life – then my behaviour will be shaped by what *I* want and, *de facto*, I shall have made myself into my own god.

On the other hand, a Christian's behaviour is shaped by what *God* wants and by what *He* teaches us; and sometimes that can be somewhat at variance with what we would

prefer. So although God's grace is universally present and available to all, those who benefit from it will be those who are willing to bend the knee in humble acceptance of God's will, say sorry for their sins, be willing to be converted, change their behaviour, and live according to God's goodness, truth, and beauty rather than their own attitudes, tastes, and values.

We cannot be mere passive onlookers of God's work of redemption: we must be active participants in the salvation of souls, ours and others. St Augustine said, "God *created* us without us, but He did not will to *save* us without us," (*Sermo* 169, 11, 13: PL). If we wish to pass through the narrow door, then we must be active in our *longing* for God, we must *want* Him, we must want to *be like Him*, we must be willing to follow His commandments, and not just those that suit us, and we must accept *His* way of doing things instead of ploughing our own furrow. To do otherwise, for example to come to Church every week but remain complacent about what needs changing in our lives, about what still needs conforming to God's will, risks our knocking on the door at the end of time and being told, "I do not know where you come from."

It is unwise to presume that just because we are baptized we will automatically get to Heaven. Instead, we must actively *engage* with the living God and *choose* to go through that narrow door, so that, willing to be last in *this* world, we might perhaps find ourselves among the first in the next.