

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 66:18-21; Psalm 117 (116); Hebrews 12:5-7; Luke 13:22-30

Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many will not be able

Luke 13:22 Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. 23 Someone asked him, “Lord, will only a few be saved?”

He said to them, 24 “Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. 25 When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then in reply he will say to you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ 26 Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’ 27 But he will say, ‘I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!’

28 There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. 29 Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. 30 Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The reading is very challenging on at least two levels. The topic is some kind of contrast between those who feel they belong and those who actually get into the kingdom. The setting is quite hard especially in vv. 27-28. The other level of difficulty is ascertaining the traditions (plural) behind the text and trying to name their original settings within the ministry (it seems clear that the traditions gathered here were originally distinct sayings).

The traditions found here are dispersed in the other Gospels.

V. 22 = Luke only, because of the journey to Jerusalem theme.

V. 23 = Luke only, who often “provides” a questioner.

Vv. 24-26 = Matthew 7:13-14, 21-23 (Sermon on the Mount)

V. 28-29 = Matthew 8:11-12 (centurion’s servant)

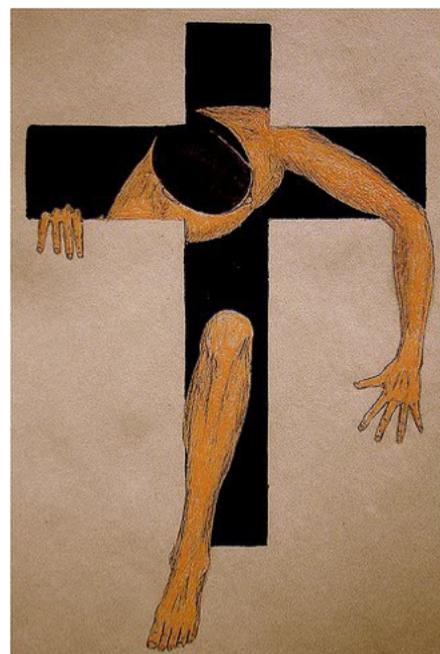
V. 30 = Matthew 20:16; Mark 10:31

KIND OF WRITING

It is a series of discrete teachings, taken from the common source of Matthew and Luke, known in scholarship as Q, with one saying coming from Mark. Q is made up almost entirely of sayings with a very strong wisdom and ethical emphasis. The form that lay behind both Matthew and Luke may have looked like this:

Q13:24 Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.

Q13:25-27 When once the householder has risen up and shut the door, you will begin to stand outside and to knock at



Thought for the day

For a long time, Western Christianity was marked by a deep pessimism. Most were surely going to hell! In sum, we seem to have moved from clarity and pessimism to agnosticism and optimism. A necessary rebalancing, of course, but with the attendant risk of complacency, convinced as we are, and ought to be, of God’s boundless mercy, love and compassion. These gifts, on the other hand, should not trigger a kind of lazy confidence but should invite even greater engagement, commitment and costly discipleship. God desires the whole person, *all* that I am.

Prayer

God of costly love, help us to take up the path of discipleship and respond to your Son’s call by giving our whole selves to you and the Gospel. Amen.

the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us.’ He will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from,’ Then you will begin to say, we ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ But he will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from; depart from me, all you workers of iniquity!’

Q13:28-29 You will weep and gnash your teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets thrust out. Men will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God.

Q13:30 Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The text is largely about the inclusion of those without rights into the God’s redeemed people and some Old Testament passages are especially relevant.

Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; Philistia too, and Tyre, with Ethiopia— “This one was born there,” they say. (Psalms 87:4)

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. (Isaiah 25:6-7)

The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. (Isaiah 52:10)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:23-27)

A certain ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother.’” He replied, “I have kept all these since my youth.” When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (Luke 18:18-25)

ST PAUL

A reverse warning is given by Paul in Romans 11, worth citing at length:

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember

that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree. (Romans 11:17-24)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 22 This is the first of several travel notes in Luke’s Jerusalem journey section of Luke 9-19; other notes appear at 17:11; 18:31; 19:28, 41.

Verse 23 The question is triggered by the warnings just given in the previous passage. It was also a question much discussed among the rabbis themselves.

Verse 24 “Strive” is very strong here (the verb means an athletic contest): Try your hardest (NJB); Exert every effort (NET); Make every effort (REB).

Verse 25 V. 25 doesn’t quite seem to follow from v. 24 and most likely reflects a distinct tradition (as in Matthew’s version). The narrow door symbolises the cost of discipleship. The pressure to use the present moment for that very struggle is underlined by the (future) shutting of that door (most likely indicating the second coming). The question remains as to why the Lord should reply in this way. An explanation is given in Matthew in context but the related tradition in Luke is found in Luke 6:46-49. Cf. *“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.”*

(Luke 6:46-49)

Verse 26 The claim is to relationship without responsibility. It is quite difficult to imagine the original setting of such a saying, but it looks as if some sort of right of entrance through mere belonging (to Judaism?) is being asserted, perhaps in the light of openness to Gentiles.

Verse 27 Very severe, because Jews do know where they come from.

Verse 28 This sounds quite like Matthew, although his use of it in Mt 8 is surely an interpolation into that story. Weeping and gnashing statistics: 6-0-1+0. Clearly, it is Matthean.

Verse 29 A common vision of the kingdom, but now extended to all nations, irrespective of ethnic origin.

Verse 30 In context, this is a judgement against Jews (who used to be first) and for Gentiles (who used to be last).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The question put to Jesus is one that many still ask: “Will many be saved?” In his answer Jesus is not concerned about numbers but warns his listeners about complacency. Just as his listeners could not regard the mere fact of being Jews as sufficient for salvation, neither can we regard being Christians as enough. That entitlement will come from our acceptance of Jesus. For any relationship to be alive – either with god or with another human person – the real question is “Is my heart in this relationship?” What does your experience tell you of this?

2. “Strive to enter by the narrow door”. Jesus himself is on his journey to Jerusalem, purposeful and determined. True followers of him will also be purposeful and determined. That is true in any journey, career, or relationship if there is to be growth or progress. What it is like for you when you fail to do this? What is it like for you when the effort is there?

PRAYER

To the banquet of your kingdom, O God of the nations, you have invited people of every race and tongue. May all who are called to a place at your table come, by the narrow way, to the unending feast of life.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

The Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts

Heb 12:5 And have you forgotten the exhortation addressed to you as sons (*huios*)? “My son (*huios*), do not scorn the Lord’s discipline (*paideia*) or give up when he corrects you. 6 “For the Lord disciplines (*paideuō*) the one he loves and chastises every son (*huios*) he accepts.”

Heb 12:7 Endure your suffering as discipline (*paideia*); God is treating you as sons (*huios*). For what son (*huios*) is there that a father does not discipline (*paideuō*)?

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading is a direct continuation of last week’s, taking us a bit more deeply into the exhortation. The language used is undoubtedly awkward for us today, wary as we are of (excessive or indeed any) discipline. However, the chief idea is not that God is punishing us but rather that difficult experiences should be “read” and appropriated in the light of our relationship with God, thus purifying the dross of the difficult, making it into the gold of discipline and discipleship.

KIND OF WRITING

We are in the final passages of exhortation in the letter/homily.

1:1-4	Introduction
1:5-14	Exposition
2:1-4	Exhortation
2:5-5:10	Exposition
5:11-6:20	Exhortation
7:1-10:18	Exposition
10:19-39	Exhortation
11:1-40	Exposition
12:1-13	Exhortation
12:14-13:19	Exhortation
13:20-25	Conclusion

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Clearly, something is going on which is testing the community and the writer tries to address this and help them make sense of it.

RELATED PASSAGES

On this topic we have much to say and it is difficult to explain, since you have become sluggish in hearing. (Hebrews 5:11 NET)

For you need endurance in order to do

God’s will and so receive what is promised. (Hebrews 10:36 NET)

My child, do not despise discipline from the LORD, and do not loathe his rebuke. For the LORD disciplines those he loves, just as a father disciplines the son in whom he delights. (Proverbs 3:11–12 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 5a The tone depends on whether the translation reads as a question (as in the RSV, the JB in the lectionary and the NET as here) or as a statement (as in the the NRSV, the NABRev etc.). A statement certainly feels harsher, but the writer can be very direct (see citations above). Also, a statement makes a somewhat more natural introduction to a citation.

The theme of remembering and forgetting is extensive in Hebrews, using a variety of verbs. *To be unaware* (13:2), *to remember* (Heb 11:15, 22; 13:7), *to recall* (Heb 2:6; 8:12; 10:17; 13:3), *to remember or remind* (Heb 10:32); *to forget* (Heb 6:10; 13:2, 16). The form used here has a prefix (*eklanthanomai*), making it intensive, so it means “to forget altogether” or “to forget completely.” It is not without sharpness.

Exhortation is *paraklēsis*, which means both exhortation and encouragement (cf. the paraclete). The intention is quite positive. The strong affirmation continues in the mentions of “sons.” The NRSV is more inclusive at this point with “children.” In spite of the word “as”, the listeners are addressed not “as if” but really as the children of God. An absolutely key text to read here is Heb 2:5–18, too long to cite in full. Jesus is the Son of God uniquely, but we are all his brothers and sisters, and hence the daughters and sons of God *in him*.

Verses 5b-6 The quotation from Proverbs, given above, addresses the reader in the singular. Son (or child) is a non-literal use, reflecting the relationship between a wisdom teacher and *any* listener or student. In Proverbs, a particular individual is never in mind. In Hebrews, the writer avoids the word wisdom (*sōphia*) as such, but is clearly aware

of the sapiential context and connotation.

In these verses, there is considerable play with the noun *paideia* (discipline, but much more) and the verb *paideuō* (to discipline), all linked the word *pais*, meaning a child. *Pais* does not occur Hebrews, which consistently uses the term *huios*, meaning son. In the Greek tradition, *paideia* points to education and even higher culture. In the Hebrew tradition, the notion of discipline in more present, bearing in mind at the same time that this will most certainly include unpleasant, even painful, aspects. Yet, it is hard to imagine that the educational goal is absent from view, especially in v. 7. It is the mark of the father that he disciplines his son. “Scorn” translates a verb meaning to belittle, so in the context to make light of, to disregard, to take lightly.

To give up or to grow weary is in the immediate context: *Think of him who endured such opposition against himself by sinners, so that you may not grow weary in your souls and give up.* (Hebrews 12:3 NET) In v. 6 the two lines are in parallel, with the *object* coming before the verb each time. This softens the effect with emphasis on love and acceptance, thus:

*The one he loves, the Lord disciplines;
The son he accepts, he chastises.*

Chastise, in Greek, is more specific and means to flog. Being a father implies disciplining and being a child entails accepting such discipline, so as to be (further) accepted by the father.

Verse 7 The verb to endure is related to the end-time virtue of endurance, *upomonē*. Thus, the readers are reminded that what they are going through is part of the gestation and pain of the eschaton. The last rhetorical question is powerful because it contains an implied double negative, with the expected answer “none.” Double negatives are not without their power!

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. In my own experience, how have I dealt with the truly difficult so that might become a source of life?
2. Is there anything going on now in my life which is painful and upsetting? How is my faith helping me?

PRAYER

Loving God, when hardships come our way, be our help so that we can endure what is difficult and grow in our love for you and your love for us. Amen.

They shall bring all your kin from all the nations to my holy mountain

Isa 66:18 For I know their works and their thoughts, and I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory, 19 and I will set a sign among them. 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. 20 They shall bring all your kindred from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and on mules, and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring a grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. 21 And I will also take some of them as priests and as Levites, says the LORD.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The great book of the prophet Isaiah ends with the resounding 66:6-24. The Lord him will give new birth to the Holy City, as a woman gives birth to a child. It seems to have been chosen today to anticipate v. 29 in the Gospel reading.

KIND OF WRITING

In the midst of all the great poetry of Third Isaiah, our reading is actually prose. Within our excerpt—really part of what precedes and what follows—there are different moments, identified as “decrees” of YHWH.

- Vv. 18-19 — a speech of YHWH
- v. 20 a decree about fellow Israelites
- v. 21 a decree about priests
- v. 22 a decree about your seed
- v. 23 a decree about all flesh
- v. 24 a reminder of judgment

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Chapters 56-66 constitute the closing reflections, usually understood to be from “Third” Isaiah, a figure certainly to be distinguished from First Isaiah (1-39) and not so certainly from Second Isaiah (40-55). In any case, the context has changed. It seems the exiles are home and undertaking the difficult task of reconstruction.

Although our reading is prose, most of Third Isaiah is made up of a series of poems, which can be entitled as follows:



- 56:1-8: YHWH calls worshippers
- 56:9-57:13 Idolatry punished
- 57:14-21 God leads the humble
- 58 the fasting God desire
- 59 Repentance leads to salvation
- 60 The Glory of Zion
- 61 The prophet is sent to the poor
- 62 The Restoration of Jerusalem
- 63:1-6 Punishment for the nation
- 63:7-64:12 A communal lament
- 65 The righteous inherit the land
- 66:1-16 Judgement for the righteous
- 66:17-24 All nations will come to Jerusalem, their goal.

RELATED PASSAGES

Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall be acceptable on my altar, and I will glorify my glorious house.

Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows? For the coastlands shall wait for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from far away, their silver and gold with

them, for the name of the Lord your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has glorified you. Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you; for in my wrath I struck you down, but in my favour I have had mercy on you. Your gates shall always be open; day and night they shall not be shut, so that nations shall bring you their wealth, with their kings led in procession. For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish; those nations shall be utterly laid waste. (Isaiah 60:4-12)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 18 The prophet extends the offer of final salvation to all the nations. “Glory” points to the presence and inner reality of God, God’s “substance” so to speak. See Isaiah 40:5.

Verse 19 What is the sign? The writer means that a miracle will convince the nations that he, YHWH, is the only true God. *Tarshish*—unknown but reasonably identified with Tharsis in Spain; *Put*—near Ethiopia, possibly Lybia; *Tubal*—Asia Minor, possibly the later Cilicia, close to Greece; *Javan*—Ionia and, later on, all of Greece.

Verse 20 The nations will assist in the return from Exile, using every know possible mode of transport. For a similar account, see above under Old Testament Background.

Verse 21 The temple service will be restored with the re-establishment of the priesthood.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Hope in adversity can be difficult to sustain, of course. When you have faced seeming real difficulty, how have you kept going?
2. The reading speaks of God restoring right worship. This is always the case: even when we fail to pray, God himself re-establishes the relationship and invites us home.

PRAYER

Loving God, you are the father of us all, regardless of race, religion or culture. Under your guidance, show us how to live together in mutual respect, tolerance and reconciliation. In this way, may all know that we all have the same father. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Isaiah 66:18-21; Psalm 117 (116); Hebrews 12:5-7; Luke 13:22-30

READINGS 1 AND 3

The reading is a little bit in tension with the question in the third reading about the few to be saved. Rather, it teaches a kind of universal salvation, hinted at in v. 29 of the Gospel. Even that verse is somewhat in tension with the Gospel, which pits the nations against the Jews (v. 28), whereas the first reading unites them. Plenty of food for thought!

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 117 (116) includes *all the nations* in the praise of God. In this way, it matches the first reading, which teaches universal salvation

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 66:18-21

The in-gathering is a very appealing topic. Our first reading speaks of God gathering the Israel and the nations, so that together they might worship the same Lord.

Second reading

Hebrews 12:5-7

What do we do with difficult experiences? We can ignore them or really try to make us of them, as suggested by this reading from Hebrews.

Gospel

Luke 13:22-30

Jesus' words and mission were not at all always consoling: a "comfortable" Gospel is really a contradiction in terms and from time to time a shake-up is good for us.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

For the first three days of this week, we read from 2 Thessalonians. On account of both style and content, it seems that 2 Thessalonians was written *after* the circulation of the undisputed letters (hence the similarity with 1 Thessalonians). It was probably not the first pseudepigraphical letter (hence the similarity with Ephesians and Colossians). There are three interrelated issues: persecution, eschatology and the "idlers." 2 Thessa-

lonians can best be understood as an attempt to bring Pauline teaching up-to-date in a new situation and for a later, perhaps second generation, Pauline "church."

Monday 22 August

Our Lady, mother and queen

A 2 Thessalonians 1:1-5, 11-12

A word of appreciation is always welcome! 2 Thessalonians begins with a warm prayer of thanksgiving for the church in Thessalonica and concludes with a prayer for all the believers there.

Matthew 23:13-22

The Jesus of this story is stern, but be careful not to leave it in the past. His teaching is for us today as well.

Tuesday 25 August

St Rose of Lima

2 Thessalonians 2:1-3, 14-17

The context for this reading is excited, perhaps excitable, expectation of the end of time and the second coming of Jesus. The writers dampens these expectations down and closes with a prayer for the Thessalonian Christians.

Matthew 23:23-26

Religions can lose sight of the essentials and focus on the trivial—today, as well as in the past.

Wednesday 24 August

St Bartholomew, apostle

Apocalypse 21:9-14

What will heaven be like? Using a rich array of metaphors—marriage, jewellery, a city, the twelve tribes and the Lamb of God—our reading offers a stunning, vibrant and inviting portrait.

John 1:45-51

In this Gospel, the spread of the Good News is a kind of wildfire, with one person drawing another in. Symbolically, the fig tree referred to knowledge of God and evil and hence to the Torah which gives us this knowledge.

Thursday 25 August

St Louis, king of France

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Today we start reading from 1 Corinthians, one of Paul's great letters to his most difficult community. He begins as usual with a word of appreciation in the form of a thanksgiving prayer. As we listen, we may wonder for what would Paul give thanksgiving today?

Matthew 24:42-51

We are children of the light and should live alert lives, not sleepwalking through life!

Friday 26 August

1 Corinthians 1:17-25

It seems the Corinthians overestimated the value of eloquence and even logic, while neglecting the crucifixion, a paradox at the heart of Christian faith. Paul describes this paradox is very arresting language.

Matthew 25:1-13

Today's parable is a reminder that there are some things which only we can do for ourselves.

Saturday 27 August

St Monica, mother

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Paul illustrate the paradox of the cross in the lives of the Corinthians. The "foolishness" of the cross confirmed by the "foolishness" of the Corinthians—a rather high risk strategy of persuasion!

Mark 6:17-29

The gospel—special for the feast—tells the story of the death of John the Baptist. It is a grisly end for a great prophet, facing death at the whim of his enemy.

(There are some inaccuracies and improbabilities in the Gospel account as well as echoes of the Books of Esther and Judith. The version by Josephus seems closer to the Realpolitik of Herod Antipas, who was *not* a king. See *Jewish Antiquities* 18:116–119.)