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21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Date: Sunday, August 25, 2019 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** C
First Reading: Isaiah 66:18–21
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 117:1, 2 | **Response:** Mark 16:15
Second Reading: Hebrews 12:5–7, 11–13
Gospel Acclamation: John 14:6
Gospel Reading: Luke 13:22–30
Preached at: the Jesuit Institute, the Catholic Church of the Resurrection in Bryanston, the St Martin de Porres Catholic Church in Orlando West, Soweto and the St John Paul II Catholic Community in Linmeyer **in the** Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa**.**

Our readings today address a disappointed people but they offer a universal hope of salvation – not a guarantee, but a promise that all are welcome.

We know that 200 years after the text of Isaiah was written, there was great disappointment among the Jews after their exile, and they turned to the wisdom of today's reading. The Jewish people in exile, who had since married foreigners, yearned for salvation for themselves and their families. The prophet Isaiah announced a hopeful and inclusive vision from the God of Salvation that his Kingdom will welcome people from all nations. Indeed, it concludes that from among these nations, God will even take some of them as priests and for Levites. Nothing would be reserved for Jews alone, or for a later inner caste. Everyone would be welcome.

In our time where foreigners are distrusted, often made to feel unwelcome, can we say that we are part of God's new creation when we fail to see God in the other, to see Christ in the stranger, and to recognise that God's Kingdom is made up of a diversity of peoples. Salvation will come with God's Kingdom, but perhaps it's precisely from the other, the outsider in our lives, that we can truly experience God's salvation, his mercy, and his love in our lives.

Let's pray today that we might encounter God, not only in the other, but with and through the other too. And let us pray that all forms of clericalism might be removed from our midst, so that an evermore inclusive Church is allowed to be present to us.

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In our second reading we hear talk of discipline and encouragement, that the people might not grow from disappointment to despair, but rather trust in, and praise, the Lord, as we heard in the Psalm as well. The author of the letter to the Hebrews wants to encourage the people to persevere despite their sufferings, and to live out their faith courageously.

This letter could have been written for us too. In our time there is much to be disappointed about. Our traditional leaders, whether in politics or the church, business or entertainment, all have disappointed and continue to disappoint. Sometimes it is hard to know who we can truly rely on; whose example is truly worth modelling ourselves upon. This is why we must always turn our face to the Lord. To trust and praise Him. For He alone will not disappoint us.

I saw an interview last week between Stephen Colbert and Anderson Cooper on CNN. They were talking about grief, and Anderson asked whether Stephen Colbert really believed, as he was quoted to have said, 'that all punishments from God are in fact God's gifts'. Stephen Colbert replied, 'yes', I believe they are gifts because existence is itself a gift. And all existence has some element of suffering in it. (He later pointed out that he was quoting Tolkien.) But this is the discipline of God – who shared Godself with us in the eucharist, so that we might endure and persevere and not give up. Stephen then said that he realised why he loved the thing that caused his suffering, because it helped him to love others who suffer, and to identify with them too. This is the hope of God's discipline in our lives that we hear about in the 2nd reading. But it depends on our image of God. If we have an image of God as a loving father, then the discipline he offers to us, his children, will be like that for a child who needs to grow in, from and into love. But if our image of God is inaccurate – where we see God as uncaring, or vindictive, or in some way not personal, then that discipline might be too much to bear. Let's pray that our image of God, and ourselves, might be purified into the truth by the Spirit.

In our Gospel Jesus offered a saying – typical to many of his sayings – that used paradox and a reversal of the state of affairs to make his point. He is asked whether salvation is for the few, or for the many. He teaches that many will come from the north and the south, from the east and the west, but each will have to pass a test and enter through the narrow gate.

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On the one hand, we hear how, following Isaiah, salvation is intended not for the few in the inner circle, but includes the many from all nations. But on the other hand, the narrow door and test will be a true relationship with the living God. True Christianity recognises that we cannot put a limit on God's generosity, that his call is all encompassing and welcomes peoples of every nation, tribe and nationality. Because of this, we cannot have a Church that excludes people. We cannot have Church organisations that expel people or find reasons for excluding them. Rather we should find every reason, however slight or tenuous, to be welcoming, to be inclusive, to be forgiving, and to be God's face to them.

We live in a country that is scared and traumatised. Politicians play to our fears and if we do not consciously live the hope that the Gospel demands, we can find ourselves swept up in that hatred and hopelessness too. But as Christians who know that our reason for hope is not abstract, it is a person in Jesus, who is risen and who has sent his Spirit to be our comforter and guide, we have a duty to encounter God. And that is the test by which we will be judged. Can we pass through that narrow gate? Can we open that closed door? Yes – but only if we know the God who stands there, like the Prodigal Father, waiting for us.

We must therefore not judge others – to paraphrase Pope Francis– for who are we to judge? Rather, we must examine ourselves and our own lives. To borrow an athletic metaphor from St Paul. Our inclusive faith does not mean that everyone will win the race. It just means that everyone is invited to run that race. But once in the race, we must strive to finish it well. One means of striving in that race is to consciously always try to put a good interpretation on what other people are saying. St Ignatius once wrote:

"It should be presupposed that every good Christian ought to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbour's statement than to condemn it. Further, if one cannot interpret it favourably, one should ask how the other means it. If that meaning is wrong, one should correct the person with love; and if this is not enough, one should search out every appropriate means through which, by understanding the statement in a good way, it may be saved." (St Ignatius Loyola, Spiritual Exercises, No. 22) Imagine what our lives would be like if we lived our Christian calling more concerned with how we might save our neighbour's statements and understand everything in a good way, rather than judging them.

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Some of the Fathers of the Church thought that the narrow door was that small place in our hearts when we say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to what one knows to be true. Can we, in the face of temptations and corruption, stick to our values, to listen to our conscience, to what we know to be good and true and beautiful, and always say ‘yes’ to God, even at great cost? That too will be the test. Let’s pray that we will have the wisdom and courage to make those good decisions in our lives.

Finally, let us pray for those who are ‘outside’ of this community. Whether because of their class, their sexual orientation or their gender, or even their opinions. There are many ways to exclude. Let us pray that we might never seek to keep God’s Good News to ourselves, but having experienced his Good News, let us share it with everyone – especially those who are in most need to hear it.

Amen.

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