

This Sunday's Readings – the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time – Today's readings can be summed up as follows – salvation is not just for the chosen few but for everyone.

The first reading is taken from the last chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (3rd Isaiah), which was written approximately 25 years after the return of the exiles from Babylon. In this reading, we read about some very strange geographic locations. Let's take a look at these places. Tarshish refers to southern Spain; Put and Lud to North Africa; Mosoch refers possibly to Cappadocia – modern day central Turkey; and Javan refers to Greece or Ionia as it was known in ancient times. So what is the purpose of these strange places? In the context of this reading, they represent the furthest extent of the known world. All will come to Jerusalem from the far reaches of the world to give glory to God, and not just the Israelites. God's salvation and redemption are for everyone, not just the chosen few, the Israelites. The last verse is particularly important – "Some of these I will take as priests and Levites, says the Lord". The positions of priests and Levites were reserved only for the Israelites. Now they are open to all who come to minister and worship the Lord in Jerusalem. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2007 syndicated column further comments on this reading – "Another mind-expander, Third-Isaiah, delivered a similar message five hundred years before Jesus. Instead of viewing the two Jewish exiles as punishments from Yahweh, the prophet is convinced they provided a way to introduce Gentiles to faith in Yahweh. These non-Jewish believers will not only join their Jewish brothers and sisters in rebuilding Jerusalem, but God will reward them by taking some of them as priests and Levites - professions reserved for just one family within one tribe of Israel - something unheard of among Jews".

The Gospel reading from Luke appears to be somber and foreboding. However, the message is the same only from a slightly different angle. Jesus is asked "will only a few people be saved". His response is that it is not easy to enter the Kingdom of God – reference to the narrow gate. The role of the disciple (from the Latin *discere* meaning "to learn") is not an easy one to follow. However, as St. Paul says, we must take on the role of the disciple in order to be saved. The reading continues with a sense of urgency. Jesus is extending the message of salvation to the Jews, the chosen people, first. However they are rejecting Jesus' invitation. It must be understood that this is not a forced invitation, for love cannot be forced on anyone. This invitation then will be extended to all peoples, the Gentiles, who will accept His invitation. "And people will come from the east and the west, and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the Kingdom of God". This is another example of Luke's message of universality. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment on universalism – "The universalism of the Christian gospel is no easygoing thing. It is intended for all but is offered through Christ alone. The universality goes hand in hand with the "scandal of particularity." The messianic banquet is for those who are prepared to "eat the flesh" of the Messiah and to "drink his blood.'" Fr. Roger Karban in his 2007 syndicated column adds this additional comment on this Gospel reading – "In today's gospel pericope, Jesus fields a closed-minded question and gives an open-minded response."Someone asked him, 'Lord, will only a few people be saved?'" He instinctively informs the person, "You're asking the wrong question. How does the number of people saved affect your own salvation?" Jesus then explains part of what it means "to enter

through the narrow gate." The concept doesn't revolve around being a member of an "in group." Those who don't even share our religious affiliation are just as (often more) likely to join in that great heavenly banquet as we are".

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* adds this cultural comment on today's readings – "Our group-oriented ancestors in the Faith put their primary and greatest faith in the family. This was the core of the "inside"; everyone else was "outside." At a higher level, the chosen people of God were the "insiders," while all others were outsiders. The normal way to become an "insider" is to be born into the family or group. But all societies recognize other ways of becoming an "insider." One general method is to share the same substance that a natural-born child would share with the parents. Thus unrelated children who share the same wet nurse become kin to each other and may not marry each other. Or, two unrelated individuals who share blood become "blood relatives." Societies often select a common bodily substance (blood, saliva, semen, or milk), which when commingled establishes a relationship of kinship between two people.

TABLE FELLOWSHIP

A second way of becoming "related" or becoming "an insider" is by the exchange of food through commensality, or eating together. Friendships are sealed and strangers are integrated into the community by sharing a common meal, even when the ritual aspects of this act of eating together are not explicit. This understanding of table fellowship lies at the heart of Paul's argument in Galatians 1-2. Peter the Judean used to eat with Gentile converts (non-Judeans) and with this ritual action clearly proclaimed that Judean and non-Judean believers in Jesus were kin. When some Judean believers scolded Peter for eating with believers in Jesus who had not also been circumcised (that is, who had not become Judeans first before becoming messianists), Peter stopped eating with the non-Judean believers. Paul was livid. Peter's withdrawal from table fellowship with non-Judean believers in Jesus amounted to saying that these non-Judeans were not really related or part of the same family as Judean believers in Jesus.

EATING WITH JESUS

Jesus' contemporaries in Luke 13 are claiming the same thing. "By eating with us, Jesus, you have made us kin with you. We are your fictive relatives. Why now are you excluding us from fellowship?" Jesus' answer has already been given earlier in this same chapter (Luke 13:2 and 5): "Unless you repent, you will all perish . . ." It is not enough to have shared a meal with Jesus. A radical change of life is also necessary to establish a kinship relationship with him. Jesus' contemporaries remind him: "You taught in our streets." Jesus' harsh reply to them insinuates: "Yes, but all you did was listen. You did not take my teaching to heart and reform your lives. You think superficial acquaintance with me and my teachings suffices." Jesus offers a prophetic warning to believers of all times. Only those will join him at the heavenly banquet who seek to understand him and his message, who seek to learn "the honest truth about Jesus" (Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 19)".

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