



Homily for 4/17/2021

3rd Sun. of Easter / 2nd Sun. after Easter Very Rev. J. David Carter, JCL, JV

The question was posed to me last week about how many will be saved. The person had read a sermon by a saint who suggested that the number would be surprisingly low and was disturbed by it. This person had experienced a sort of anxiety about the salvation of those around him, and he rightly sought counsel. I was able to respond to him, and I answered that there are different emphases needed for different souls at different times along the journey of life. What one soul benefits from at one time in his life may not be what another soul needs at a different time. There are many out there who don't take the eternal disposition of their soul seriously enough. These would benefit from reading what this person had read. However, there are also many souls out there, like him, who take this eternal disposition very seriously, to the point that it becomes scrupulosity and a doubting of God's mercy. What I recommended to him instead was to read the writings of St. Faustina and the devotion to Divine Mercy or St. Margaret Mary Alacoque and the devotion to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. I reminded him that God is not a cruel God, and we directly condemn any theology of souls predestined to hell. God does not desire the death of the sinner, but rather wants the sinner to repent and live. This is God's salvific will. However, God is also the great respecter of the free will he gave us. He does not force us into heaven against our will. He lets us choose. But he also constantly woos us like a bridegroom to a bride to be joined to him. He reminds us in Jesus that all it takes is faith the size of a mustard seed: If you cry out, "Lord, have mercy," He will answer in mercy!

But it struck me that perhaps many are still confused by this question of how many will be saved. We have a tendency to live in extremes. Either we hold the hardline that most are damned to hell, and maybe even include ourselves in that, or we hold to the opposite extreme that God would never allow anyone to go to hell, and we presume that we will all go to heaven, as if by right. Both are in error. One lacks hope and the other lacks justice. The threshold for going to heaven is not as high as some would suppose. Those who distort the analogy of the narrow gate and propose that the gate to heaven is a closely guarded and impossible path would have us believe that heaven is gained by our own merit of perfect knowledge, perfect morality, or perfect living and therefore hardly anyone except the purest, smartest and holiest will be there. But that is to fall into the heresy of Gnosticism, Pelagianism, and later Jansenism and any number of variations upon the theme that says human agency, partially or alone, justifies us and makes us pleasing in God's sight.

On the other hand, there is the persistent heresy of universalism that says a good God would never allow anyone to go to hell, and therefore no matter what, all dogs go to heaven, and all people too. This is religion without repentance and Grace without the Cross. This paves the way for the recent error cropping up that states that God wills the plurality and diversity of religions because they all lead to the same place. This is where the narrow gate comes in. Christ is the narrow gate. Buddha cannot save us from eternal damnation. Mohammed cannot present us to the Father. Science cannot preserve the immortal soul into eternal life. While God may allow, in His permissive will, that people persist in erroneous, false and idolatrous religion, He does not positively will the diversity of religions. That is an error and, in fact, a heresy. Because Christ alone can save us; hence the narrow gate. There is no doubt that we live in a pluralistic world with many competing ideas and ideologies. Even if we acknowledge that they have hints of the truth, we dare not presume they are, in fact, true and complete paths to God on their own. The reality is that equivocating these things in our dialogue can poison our minds and induce us to rebellion and rejection of the truth that will save us eternally.

Indeed, I believe the question of how many will be saved is worth asking. It is asked in the Scriptures. Jesus said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." Those who heard this said, "Then who can be saved?" Now before you think this is turning into a pitch for our capital campaign, I would have you note that God did not say, "the one who tithes". What he actually says is something very liberating. He said, "What is impossible for human beings is possible for God." Here is the answer. Salvation is God's work not ours. If we seek to save ourselves, we will always be lost. If we cling to our Savior, we will always be saved. It is not about our merit,



and even the amount of our tithe, but about our trust and faith. It is not about our own effort; it is about our trust in Jesus.

I think that a more precise question for us to be asking is really, “How many profess to be saved but are apathetic in the practice of true religion?” That is, they say they believe, but they live as practical atheists. They either live as if everything depended on them, giving them anxiety, or they live as if salvation were a given and they just “Let it go,” as Elsa sang in her sub-zero soliloquy. Universalism induces us to drop the desire to do our best because we don’t think our actions matter at all. Pelagianism leads to despair because we think our actions matter too much. In a nutshell, we stopped placing our trust in Jesus and put it rather in our actions, our social justice movements, our economic policies thinking we need to “do” in order to be saved. Or we have succumbed to sloth and the pursuit of the convenient and easy way and no longer challenge our vices, thinking it doesn’t matter anyway. We have abandoned the pursuit of holiness, which is precisely the submission of will and intellect to Jesus Christ and His plan of salvation, and turned rather to our own will and think we can do it ourselves. The truth is that God has definitively revealed himself to us and has shown us the way back to Him through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the only name by which we may be saved.

The reality is that we are called to be with Jesus not just do things we think he would like. Action follows being. How does one justify his life before God? How will one make an account? When one stands before God, what will we offer him to earn heaven? Will it be our good works? Let’s put our hand to the same sword as our Protestant brothers and sisters and slay that strawman. Good works cannot earn salvation or justification. That has never been the Catholic position and is a distortion of the beautiful doctrine on participation in the work of salvation by Grace.

Will it be by your empathy or niceness? Let’s slay the false religion of “nice”. There is a subtle error in thinking that because someone is “nice” they are worthy of heaven. This is just another form of salvation by good works, or rather, salvation by emotional disposition. “Nice” people aren’t guaranteed heaven. The nicest of pagans lacks the most essential thing of all: incorporation into the salvific power of the blood of the God-man Jesus Christ through Baptism to atone for our sins.

Will it be our self-lessness? This is the same subtle error. We say that if we are selfless, then surely God will be pleased with us and let us into heaven, owing to our selflessness. We can surely say that being selfless disposes us to receiving God’s Grace, but it doesn’t substitute for it. The Buddhist who has renounced all desire and emptied his mind of everything lacks the most important aspect of all: to be filled with the Holy Spirit of God through Jesus Christ in His saving sacraments.

So, what are we to present for our justification? St. Paul has the answer: “We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one. He is expiation for our sins, and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world” This is the answer. Trust in Jesus Christ and His work of salvation for us – be one with Him and you enter the gate to heaven. “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest.” The question of salvation is answered by throwing ourselves upon His mercy. How many that ends up being is not ours to know. If the number is small, it is not because God is cruel; it is because we have lacked faith in Him and tried to do it ourselves. Throw yourself on his mercy and you will not be lost. This not a matter for hedging bets, playing both sides or “keeping an open mind”. You cannot serve both God and mammon. To be saved you must claim God, or rather let Him claim you.

In just a moment we will stand to profess our Faith. Credo. I believe. Everyone here will have to make a choice as to what they will profess. Every Sunday is a renewal of our baptismal promises in which we were claimed for Christ and in which we claim Him as our hope and salvation. If you were on the fence for whatever reason, I invite you to make your decision for the Lord Jesus and Him alone. Stop trying to save yourself. Put your trust in the Lord our God and His power to save.
May Jesus Christ be praised!