

THE EMMAUS SERIES

21st Sunday Year C

Isaiah 66:18-21

Hebrews 12:5-7; 11-13

Luke 13:22-30

People from east and west, north and south, will take their places in the kingdom

'Will there only be a few saved?' The response of Jesus to this question has often been interpreted in a pessimistic sense – the very opposite of the message of hope he brought to the world. Fortunately, today's biblical scholarship shows this interpretation to be mistaken. The question put to Jesus was much discussed by the rabbis. Their exclusive view had no place for the Gentiles, and their emphasis upon a strict observance of the prescriptions of the Law that was almost impossible for the common people, led them to conclude that the number of the saved would be rather small.

Jesus had no intention of entering into this discussion; in fact his whole purpose was to lead them beyond the exclusiveness they took for granted. He called them to identify with the generous ways of God. Israel's calling was, in fact, for the sake of the other peoples of the world. They were to be a 'light to the nations', leading them to come to know the life-giving ways of the one true God. The response of Jesus is along these lines. The image of 'two ways' that can be taken in life is a common one. The 'narrow door' of his parable does not imply that salvation is available to only a few; it refers to the conversion called for if his hearers are to accept his teaching, and thus become the people God wants them to be. (Matthew has this same thought, comparing a 'narrow gate' into the city with the 'wide and spacious' one that most make use of, 7:13.) Similarly, the point of the parable of the 'locked door' is not exclusion, but the need to hurry in – the opportunity brought by Jesus is coming to an end. Only conversion from the constricted ways the nation has come to take for granted will give entrance to 'the master's house' - knowing Jesus, even sitting at table with him, without heeding his call to become the people God intended them to be will leave them out in the cold.

All this is confirmed by what follows. A people who have not been faithful heirs to what they have received from 'Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets' will find themselves 'outside'. But God's purposes will not be frustrated; the peoples of the world will 'take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God'. Clearly, the Church's choice of the first reading for today's liturgy is meant to confirm this optimistic interpretation. This passage, the final lines of the bible's collection of the Isaian writings, envisages all the peoples of the known world coming to Jerusalem to worship the true God. Jesus was calling Israel back to a sharing in the generous ways of God that was their true faith tradition. But, as he makes his way to Jerusalem, time is running out.

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