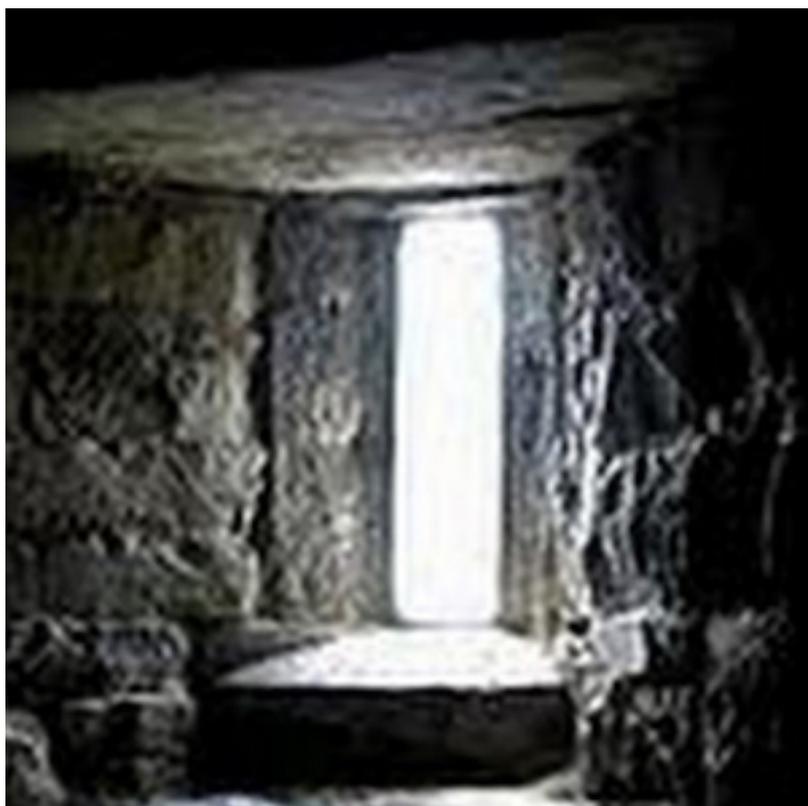


Commentary to the 21 Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

Youth Challenge Week 2: The Narrow Gate (August 21, 2016)



Message: Jesus himself is the Narrow Gate.

Do not be afraid. For me World Youth Day was a wonderful experience. Even though I am an old guy, I have a lot to learn and I find one of the best ways is to be around young people and listen to them. In this homily series on youth challenges I am sharing some of what I learned. Last week we reflected on the cross: how shared suffering can unite us with each other and with Jesus. This week we focus on the Narrow Gate. The big question is: Will only a few be saved? Jesus seems to respond, "yes." Why does Jesus imply few will come to salvation? Why is the gate so narrow? Pope Francis gives an insight in his homily at the closing Mass for World Youth Day. Few will enter the Narrow Gate because they don't want to face daunting challenges. Pope Francis spoke about three obstacles and he used Zacchaeus to illustrate them. The first obstacle is physical, even genetic. Zacchaeus is short man. Being a shrimp - the runt of the litter - people made fun of him and he reacted in the typical way: by turning the tables, by looking down on them. We see it literally and figuratively - he climbed a tree! Climbing a tree can be good, but for Zacchaeus it didn't signify humility, but a certain superiority. That's the first obstacle to entering the Narrow Gate. How many people say, "Well, I'm no saint, I got my faults but I'm not like those hypocrites down there"? Assuming superiority to others is the first obstacle.

When we look down on others we can't look at them. It forms a barrier against others - and against God. If we examine that first obstacle we can detect a second, deeper obstacle. Pope Francis identifies it as "the paralysis of shame." It's the feeling I have blown it, I don't belong, no one could understand what I've done. I will always be an outsider - and the heck with them anyway! This shame, accompanied by anger, separates Zacchaeus from others and from Jesus. Along with shame comes a third obstacle to entering the Narrow Gate. That obstacle - or challenge - is fear, especially the fear of

other people, what they might be saying or thinking. The person who shouts, "I don't care what other people think" is often the person who fears most. Why else would they say it so loud, even post it on Facebook with four-letter words? The one New Testament verse everyone knows is: "Judge not lest ye be judged." Even non-Christians know that verse. We know it because we fear judgment and because we are constantly judging others. Atheists judge others. Liberals judge others. Let's face it. We all do it and we all fear judgment.* That fear, accompanied by anger and looking down on others, keeps us from entering the Narrow Gate. Our situation when you really think about seems hopeless. We condemn others - often for the very things we have done. Rather than asking will only a few be saved we might ask, will any be saved?

The answer is: Only through Jesus! Zacchaeus, come down! Pope Francis points out that Jesus' invitation applies to young people today - and to all of us. Come down! "You do not need to look down on others," says Jesus. "I know you and I love you." Looking at Jesus we can admit we have done wrong. We've taken advantage of others, disregarded them, put ourselves first. But we don't wallow in shame. Like Zachaeus, we say, "what I have is not my own. I put it at service of others." We have a word for this - Stewardship. We'll talk about it another time. What matters now is Jesus invitation. I want to come to your home. When we were in Poland for World Youth Day, we heard over and over, St. John Paul's most famous phrase, "Do not be afraid." What did he mean - overcome your anxiety? Maybe, but when Pope John Paul said, "Do not be afraid" he often added "Open the doors to Christ." Like St. John Paul Pope Francis put that challenge directly before young people: Do not be afraid to open the doors to Jesus. Next Sunday Jesus give us the key to open that door. For today I ask you to fix in your mind that Jesus himself is the Narrow Gate. Do not be afraid. Open the doors to Christ. Amen.
***** *Although we Christians fall into judgment (criticism, gossip, detraction) we seem the only ones who recognize it as sinful behavior. I've had people rail about how judgmental Christians are and then with no sense of irony charge us with bigotry and hatred. And if they disagree with a member of the clergy it seems like the first response is to accuse us of complicity with vile forms of abuse...

Fr Phil Bloom