Homily: Proper 16, 2025 Year C

Isaiah 28:14-22 Fr. Robert J. Gaestel
Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-29
St. Luke 13:22-30

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

In today's Gospel, people ask Jesus about the final outcome. Where does it all lead? *When the saints go marching in, O Lord I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in.* Jesus's answer is, "are you sure?" Jesus leaves the question hanging. "All dogs go to heaven." There's no doubt about that. But people, well, not so fast. The question, "will those who are saved be few?" is perennial and always has been. We don't know how to answer it. And today, Jesus doesn't answer it either. In the Book of Revelation, the author, St. John the Divine says these things: "I looked and behold the number of the sealed, a hundred and forty-four thousand sealed out of every tribe of the Children of Israel." The Jehovah's Witnesses think that's the final number. But then further down, St. John says, "After this I looked and behold a great multitude which no man could number from every nation, all tribes, peoples, and throngs standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands." Which is it, 144,000 or a multitude no one can number? Yes.

Origen, one of the Early Church's greatest theologians, suggested that maybe at the very end, everything would return to God, and that could include Satan. The Church as a whole and throughout time could not sign off on this. That is primarily because in the end, salvation is tied directly to faith; faith being a choice, not an argument. The choice is acceptance or refusal of all that God wants to bestow. The question is, does one want for oneself what God wants for them or not? In the end, will we want for ourselves what God wants for us? And if not, then what? Does God then force himself upon one? Or does God respect the freedom that he has bestowed? The best we can do is to let the question live in us. There is salvation. There is also salvation's opposite. Salvation's opposite always remains a possibility. But whether that is the final outcome for anyone, including ourselves is beyond human knowing.

At the same time there is something else we can know. If you decided to spend a night reading a book from cover to cover, and that book happened to be the Bible, what you would read in that book is the story of a relationship. And in that story one party is always faithful, and the other party never is. The party that is faithful is God, and the party that is not is us. The witness of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is that God is faithful. God is faithful to himself. That means God does not change his mind. Because God doesn't change his mind, well then everything else has to. So, although there is a much-loved hymn called *Just as I am,* that is really not the point. God's faithfulness to himself means that while we may begin with Just as I Am, our goal must become, Just as I Could Be.

Today's Gospel opens with Jesus on his way through towns and villages teaching and wait for it… journeying on his way to Jerusalem; and not to be given the keys to the city, but to be crucified outside the city walls. This is the backdrop to the person asking what was certainly on the minds of many others, "will those who are saved be few?" What did the person mean when they said the word "saved." What does it mean to be saved? In last week's homily I gave a definition of salvation cobbled together from the writings of the late 20th Century Roman Catholic theologian, Henri de Lubac. I spoke of the triumph over evil and death, and our being incorporated into the divine nature shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus answers the question by speaking of a

householder and a door opened or shut. This calls to mind the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids and the wedding feast which can take us back to Isaiah who speaks of how "on this mountain the Lord of Hosts will make for all people a feast of fat things full of marrow and wine on the lees well refined…and that the Lord will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples and the veil that is spread over all nations and will swallow up death forever and wipe away tears from all faces." From this we might speak of salvation under two aspects: one being saved from, and the other being saved for. Most of the time people are concerned about the first aspect, saved from.

There is a joke you may have heard about a man who fell off a cliff, and yet was saved from certain death because his fall was broken by a branch stretching out from the wall of the cliff, that he grabbed on to and was left hanging and holding on for dear life. He called out for help. "Help! Anyone, save me!" From above voice came back, "I'll save you." The man exhales a sigh of relief. "Who are you," he calls out. The voice answers, "I'm God. I'll save you. Are you ready?" "Oh yes," man replies, anything." Comes the voice, "Okay then, let go of the branch." The man waits a few moments and then calls out, "Is there anyone else up there?" It's both funny and not. It is actually reflective of the situation in today's reading from Isaiah. Going forward, my comments reflect the insights of the late philosopher of history, Eric Voeglin in his book Israel and Revelation.

In today's Old Testament reading, Israel is threatened with being overrun by an empire to the north, Assyria. The king of Israel sought protection in an alliance with Egypt. Israel's survival, salvation if you will, would rest on balance of power and reasons of state. The prophet Isaiah told the king don't do that. What might work for other nations won't work because Israel is not like every other nation. All the other nations are structured to match the organization of the cosmos overseen by cosmic and natural forces personified in the form of various gods, small G; all who live by conflict, conquest and power struggles to get the better of each other. All of this is carried out in the history of people and nations as in might makes right. Israel is trying to play this game too. Isaiah says Israel alone consciously lives under the order of a transcendent God, who is concerned with righteousness and justice. Isaiah is saying to Israel and the king, "put your trust in God who is concerned with the "plummet of righteousness and the line of justice," and if you do that, everything will be okay.

In other words, what Vladimir Zelensky should do to counter the threat of Vladimir Putin is not to organize a coalition of European allies, and acquire armaments from the United States. Instead, Vladimir Zelensky should initiate and lead a religious revival, and in that way, and that way alone, Ukraine will not only survive, but prosper. As hanging over the gorge, he should heed the voice coming down to him from above. "Let go of the branch." Oh sure. The man over the cliff, the king of Israel, Vladimir Zelensky, and we ourselves hanging on for dear life, pause, and then all say in unison, "Is anyone else up there?"

Like a lot of people, I have no shortage of criticism for leaders of all kinds civic, military, business, and religious. I am often appalled at what I perceive as the permanent display of gross incompetence. At the same time, I doubt that if I were suddenly thrust into their positions and given their responsibilities, I'd know exactly what to do. No, I don't and no I wouldn't. I don't know what I should or would do. I do know what I would not do. I would not take Isaiah's advice. And no one else would either because no one could; because there is no such thing as a vacation from history. In the end there is only one person in all of time who on hearing the voice say, "Let go of

the branch," actually did it. That one person is the one who in today's Gospel is journeying toward Jerusalem.

Is there anyone else up there? What do we hear in today's Scriptures? Isaiah speaks of a foundation stone, a tested stone, and precious cornerstone and a sure foundation. "Your agreement with Sheol shall not stand. The overwhelming scourge will beat you down. The bed is too short to stretch oneself upon it, and the covers are too narrow to wrap oneself in it. I hear a decree of destruction from the Lord God of hosts upon the whole land. Strange is the deed, and alien is his work." The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of "innumerable angels in festal gathering, the assembly of first born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and spirits of a just humanity made perfect, and to Jesus, mediator of new covenant…in order that what remains is a kingdom that cannot be shaken." Is there anyone else up there? The answer is, "No there isn't." Is anyone else up there? No, there is only the One saying, "Let go of the branch."

That being the case, what Jesus says in the Gospel about the only entrance being a narrow door falls into place. "Strive to enter by the narrow door, for many will strive to enter and will not be able." All of which is to say, you can't fit a square peg into a round hole. Not only can you not fit a square peg into a round hole, you can't modify a round hole so a square peg can fit into it. That is, to fit in such a way that it leaves no gaps, no empty space, and no daylight between either the peg or the slot. The round hole cannot change itself so a square peg can fit. The square peg can and therefore must be shaped so as to become round. In other words, the Kingdom of God will not because it cannot, accommodate itself to us. Each one of us must accommodate ourselves to it.

What do you mean? Wait a minute! "You taught in our streets. We ate and drank in your presence." Well, that may be true, but you hung out around the dessert table and filled up on sweets. You wouldn't touch the liver and onions, the kale, the kimchi, and in my own case, the cilantro. You have to take in all, not just some, all for the purpose, not to be saved from, but to be saved for as in become well rounded, so as to fit into what finally is and ever shall be.

Is there anyone else up there? No, there isn't. All are invited. All may be included. But it is not just a matter of Just as I Am. It's about each of us becoming Just as I Could Be. It's Just as I Am invited and empowered to become Just as I Could Be; not in being saved from, but in being saved for: to sit at table in the Kingdom of God