

The Narrow Gate

Matthew 7:13-14 & Matthew 21:1-17

Palm Sunday/ 14th April 2019

We don't usually hear these two texts together, side by side: Jesus' teaching about the wide and narrow gates and his entry into Jerusalem through a gate, probably the Eastern or Golden Gate, the one nearest the Mount of Olives. But there is a connection between the text. In fact, I would suggest, one edifies and illuminates the other. To see this, we need fresh eyes.

As we've seen in this Lenten sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount, there are many verses in the Sermon that are taken out of context, and therefore carry distorted meanings. We like to lift out and isolate texts—such as “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:4)—and then develop warped understandings of what we think God expects from us (as we explored several weeks ago). The same is true for: “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is difficult that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Mt. 7:13-14). These verses have suffered from centuries of abuse, especially from preachers warning about dissolute, depraved, and degenerate living. “Wide,” “easy,” “broad,” have become Christian-code for loose morals. The “narrow” and “difficult” way is the way of moral perfection, piety, and purity. Because we're prone to reduce the Christian gospel into a moralistic code of behavior, we assume that Jesus is warning against bad behavior. Or we assume that only those who are good make it through the narrow gate, that they're the ones that get to heaven, which means that because the road to destruction is wide, most of humanity is destined for hell. This, too, is another way the text has been read.

Every text of scripture has a context. So if we put this text back into the context of the Sermon on the Mount, which is the foundational text of Jesus' preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God, then everything changes. And what does Jesus say earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, which we explored last week? “Strive first, therefore, for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness” (Mt. 6:33).

Now what I'm going to say might sound extreme, but I stand by it. It's impossible to make any sense of Jesus' preaching and teaching, impossible to make sense of his life, impossible to make any sense of Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter, without seeing that the kingdom of God was at the very heart of Jesus' mission and life. The *basileia tou theou*, in Greek. *Basileia* is difficult to translate.

Kingdom is correct, but because we have no understanding what it's like having a king or living in a kingdom, and as Americans we have no desire to have a king or live in a kingdom, the word doesn't mean much to us. It sounds exotic, romantic, like something out of a fairytale.

Because of its masculine associations, some like to drop the “g” out of “king” and refer to it as the *kindom* of God. That helps some, but I think it domesticates the real power of this word; I understand its use and use it now and again, but *kindom* sounds a little too folksy.

A better word might be *realm*. This picks up the spatial element of the Greek; the root of the English word “basilica,” a building that has an apse.

However, an even better translation, probably the best translation is the word *empire*. Now, I can’t imagine the Church ever using this word, but it’s crucial for us to think of the kingdom in this way—especially when we’re praying, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done” (Mt. 6:10), for we are essentially praying for God’s empire to come. That’s what Jesus wanted for us.

Jesus came proclaiming the empire of God, he invited his disciples to flourish in God’s empire, he invites us to live in God’s empire, and the Church itself was created to serve this empire. God’s empire is a power at work in the world, an alien power that is always at odds with and stands against the powers that be. Life in God’s empire is about justice and wholeness and healing, it’s the way of love and redemption and human flourishing and welfare. God’s empire is about life—all that makes for life and gives life, true life, calling people to life, saving people from everything that hinders us from coming alive, or threatens our lives or tries to destroy us. It’s a life of service, a life of suffering love, a life of compassion, and kindness, and joy. And it’s *this* life, the life of the kingdom, the life of God’s empire, which is the narrow way, the narrow gate!

The Greek word “narrow,” *stenos*, can have a spatial dimension, but it also has other association, such as cramped, confined, distressed, troubled, even groaning. “Narrow” is also linked in the Greek to the word “difficult,” which has associations of oppression, affliction, and persecution.¹ If this is what “narrow” and “difficult” mean, then it suggests that striving after and entering the kingdom of God will entail affliction and struggle, and even persecution from the powers that be who are always threatened by the power of God. Didn’t Jesus say in the Beatitudes, “Blessed [or flourishing] are those who are persecuted for righteousness, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed [or flourishing] are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Mt. 5: 10-11)? And we need to remember that in these blessing statements, as well as everything in Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is talking about himself. We learn who Jesus is through his teaching; and he *is* what he teaches. So that when Jesus talks about the narrow gate, he’s really talking about himself. *Jesus is the narrow gate. His life is the kingdom way, the empire way, the difficult way, and we are summoned to enter it!*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1909-1945) took this summons seriously. In his classic book *The Cost of Discipleship*, a kind of training manual for seminarians in the resistance movement against Hitler and the Third Reich (and note that “Reich” is German for empire or kingdom), we see that Bonhoeffer also understood the entrance to life equated with Jesus and the demands he makes on us. “To confess,” said Bonhoeffer, “and testify to the truth as it is in Jesus, and at the same time to love the enemies of that truth, his enemies and ours, and to love them with the infinite love of Jesus Christ, is indeed a narrow way. To believe,” said Bonhoeffer, “the promise of Jesus that his followers shall possess the earth, and at the same time to face our enemies unarmed and defenseless, preferring to incur injustice rather than to do wrong ourselves, is indeed a narrow way. To see the weakness and wrong in others, and at the same time refrain from judging them.... [This is a narrow way.] The way is unutterably hard, and at every moment we are in danger of straying from it.”²

Jesus said, “The road is difficult that leads to life.” And this in this week that we call Holy, we see the cost of Jesus’ own discipleship to the kingdom. His journey toward life

begins on the other side of that gate. If we were traveling by foot during Jesus' time, imagine approaching a city far off in the distance, and that city was your destination. To reach the gates of the city would mean in some sense that you had arrived. Jesus tells us, however, that when we approach the city that there's a new destination on the other side of the gate, something called "life." We see this notion brilliantly illustrated in John Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress* (1678, 1684). Bunyan turns things inside out. Pilgrim, the main character, approaches a gate, and with allusions to Mathew 7, where Jesus says, "Knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Mt. 7:7), Pilgrim knocks at the gate and enters. The gate marks not the end, but the beginning of a road, the beginning of the journey.

Jesus is the narrow gate; he walks the narrow way. Because his way is at odds with the powers of this world, his way is the difficult and demanding way, the way of persecution, struggle, resistance, and suffering. And during Holy Week it all comes to a head, as we witness the clash of empires. And it's Jesus' *heart*—all that he is, body and soul, thought and will and feeling and desire—his passion for God's empire that compels him "to set his face toward Jerusalem," (Lk. 9:1) to walk through its city gates, to take on the powers that be, to go straight to the temple, to take on the religious leaders who were making a mockery of God's demand for worship and justice, to take on the hollow righteousness and false piety of the Pharisees, to take on the leaders of the temple who were quick to placate the Romans, and who were, thus, collaborating with empire, the empire of Rome.

And so, the *political* dimension is everywhere in this text, but it's not evident to us because we don't expect to see it, maybe don't want to see it. For many years I didn't see it, but it's there. We've been taught that this week is about spiritual things, such as sin, and taking away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29). But we've forgotten that sin always has a public, social, political dimension, as well as being personal or individual. The Church has a bad habit of spiritualizing and sanitizing things, especially on Palm Sunday. It's easy to forget that, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" has enormous political overtones. "Look, your king is coming to you..." (Mt. 21:5)! This is an explosive statement to make in a city that was already a tinderbox. We think of "hosanna" as "praise," but it's a Hebrew word that means "save" or "rescue." So the crowds are shouting in the streets, like at a demonstration:

Save us! Save us! Rescue us! Son of David.

Save us! Save us! Rescue us! Son of David.

Save us! Save us! Rescue us! Son of David!

And who was David? The shepherd-king. And who are they asking to be saved or rescued from? The oppression of the Roman Empire.³

And, remember: crucifixion was reserved for those who posed a threat to the empire. *Full stop.*

So, sure there's a spiritual dimension to this week. Yes, the Spirit is at work—the Spirit is at work in and through Jesus who suffers as king on behalf of this kingdom, to show us the way of God's kingdom, God's empire, whose power the Caesars of the world, both then and now, cannot see and will never understand, even though they give lip service to God and sound religious and pious, surround themselves with people claiming to be religious—they are not serving the kingdom. The Caesars cannot see and cannot understand because the throne of King Jesus is not made of iron. It's not an iron throne—and he's not playing games.⁴ His throne is a cross, and he wields his power where Caesar least expects it: in

weakness, in human brokenness, in cries of dereliction and abandonment, in love that suffers, even in death—there, too, he reigns and death has no hold over him.

Scripture tells us, “For the sake of the joy that was set before him he endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2), high and lifted up (Jn. 3:14-16), he took on the power of death and the grave (1 Cor. 15:54-55), as Paul tells us. On the cross, Christ was fighting against the “principalities and powers,” as Paul said, fighting against “the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Philippians 6:12), against the dark demonic forces that are always hell-bent on destroying and enslaving and dehumanizing and even caging God’s people.

That’s what this week will bring.

It’s an enormous struggle of cosmic proportions that continues to play itself out, even today. And resurrection or Easter will mean little or nothing for us without knowing again (or perhaps the first time), the cost—*all* that was required for life, the demanding, difficult way of Christ: the narrow gate who continues to lead us into *life*.

¹ Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 273-274.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1961).

³ John Dominic Cross, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2007).

⁴ Yes, this is an allusion to George R. R. Martin’s *The Game of Thrones*. The eighth and final season of the HBO production begins on Palm Sunday evening, 14th April 2019.