

Reception and Rejection

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[0 : 00] Welcome to another Sermon on the Web from St. John's Shaughnessy Anglican Church in Vancouver, Canada.

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The following message is from the April 8, 2001 service at St. John's Shaughnessy. The Reverend David Short delivered his message from the book of Luke, the 13th chapter, verses 22 to 35.

The title of the message is Reception and Rejection. Over the last couple of years I've been reading Dostoevsky's novels, which is a good thing to do when you think you're the unluckiest person in the world.

One of the most brilliant and unsettling scenes so far I've read is in his book called The Idiot. He describes the experience of a man who's let out to be executed and only at the last moment is given a reprieve.

[1 : 25] And Dostoevsky portrays the last 20 minutes of his life in vivid detail. The closer to death he comes, the more intense the experience of time becomes.

And the prisoner is filled with a sense of eternal loneliness as he speaks to those around him. But above everything he has an overwhelming sense of clarity.

Everything is clear. His mind is clearer than it's ever been. And he's able to experience things to a depth that he hasn't before. And it's an eerie and remarkable passage to read because it happened to Dostoevsky himself.

He was captured in 1849, sentenced to death, taken out to be executed at the very last moment. The execution was stayed.

I tell you this on this Palm Sunday because it gives us a tiny mirror into Jesus' own experience here in Luke 13. As he heads towards Jerusalem, he knows he's going to be executed, but he knows there's no reprieve and no release.

[2 : 29] In fact, back in chapter 9 we read, he turns his face and set himself to go to Jerusalem. And every step along the way and every word is dominated by the fact that he knows he will suffer and die for our salvation.

And he lays aside all regard for himself and he devotes himself to this work. And he's filled with an eternal loneliness. And his words and his actions are marked by a luminous clarity.

And this passage is a brilliant illustration of it. We turn to this passage. We're reminded he's on his way to Jerusalem. And in verse 23, what kicks off these two stories or these two paragraphs is that someone comes to Jesus in verse 23, you can see there, and says, Lord, will those who are saved be few?

And Jesus gives two remarkable answers to this. The first is he explains the shape of salvation from our perspective. Look at verse 24. Strive to enter by the narrow door.

Strive to enter by the narrow door. Jesus says that salvation has boundaries. He says if you want to be a Christ follower, it means moving through a narrow door into the palace where the banquet will be held.

[3 : 51] And I'm aware as soon as I say it that this is the greatest scandal of Christianity. There are many people who think that Jesus is just simply mistaken here. He has a God who is too unnecessarily restrictive.

I mean, if God was all powerful, why can't he arrange a way for everyone to be saved? And if God loves us so much, how can he possibly send anyone to hell? The problem, of course, is with the narrowness of the door.

Why is it that Jesus keeps insisting throughout his ministry that the way is narrow? Enter by the narrow door. The answer is simply this.

That Jesus himself is the door. That he is the one alone who has gone through and died on the cross for us. He alone is the one who has risen from the dead.

He alone sits at the right hand of God as we sit here this morning. He alone will come to judge the living and the dead so that life and truth and forgiveness and grace are in his hands to give.

[4 : 53] You see, it's not that God had a number of options with regard to salvation that he could choose from. And, you know, he deliberately chose the most restrictive and difficult one because he's miserly. The opposite is true.

The danger, our danger is so great and our resistance so great that it took the death of his son to bring us salvation. And if we wish to be saved, we must go through him.

Here is the master of salvation himself. He's not telling this to frighten us. He's not telling this because God has some sort of corruption we need to investigate. He's telling us because he loves us and he cares enough to say the truth.

Yesterday I was watching the golf to see if anyone was going to beat Eldridge T. Woods. And the ads are much more interesting in the golf these days. And I was watching the ads with my son.

And one of the ads, wonderful ad, I think it's for a car. A guy comes out of an office building and it's pouring with rain and he says, rain, stop, and it does. And he walks to a highway, six lanes of traffic, and he says, traffic, stop, and it does.

[6 : 03] And he walks through. And of course when he gets in his car, he gives the car instructions. The car does everything he wants. And the ad finishes by saying, the world should be so accommodating. Now the problem for us, you see, is that it's just not up to us to make salvation more accommodating.

We're not the ones who dictate and decide the way we are to be saved. But that's God's. And Jesus says, strive to enter by the narrow door.

Don't you think it is a stunning insult to God to say to him, your way of salvation, God, is not broad enough. It's not good enough for our sensibility. I think it's a stunning insult to Jesus to say, you say you're the door, but we'll find another one.

Or to say to God, your motives are less loving than ours. You see, the door is narrow, not just because Jesus alone is the door, but because we have to come through the door on our knees.

And we can't bring any self-righteous or any religious qualification or any kind of performance. We have to leave everything aside and move in just ourselves. And it's so crucial. Jesus says, strive.

[7 : 14] And it's the word from which we get agony, struggle, labour. And I think the simple reason why we have to strive is because self-righteousness and self-confidence are so natural to us.

We meet obstacles in ourselves and around us. And Jesus wants to say to us, it's not possible to be saved without deep struggle. He's not saying, you've got to save yourself.

He's not saying, I'm a mechanism, a switch. I'm a portal which you save yourself through. I mean, if it was possible for us to save ourselves, surely we could have saved him the trouble of going to Jerusalem.

What he's saying is that salvation is not automatic and it's not easy. It's not like belonging to a sports club where you pay your dues and expect the club to come through. Jesus says, if you're going to enter by that narrow door, it's going to require deep inner character changing agony.

And the main effort of your life and the main effort of my life must be to cultivate a humble trust in that door and to enter and to strive to enter by that narrow door. And the reason it's so urgent is that none of us has unlimited time.

[8 : 25] Look at verse 25 please. Let me read it to you. When once the householder has risen up and shut the door, you will begin to stand outside and to knock and say, Lord, open to us.

And he will answer, I don't know where you come from. And you'll begin to say, we ate and drank in your presence. You taught in our streets. And he will say, I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity.

And there you will weep and gnash your teeth. You see, Jesus looks beyond history. And he says, there is a time coming when that narrow door will be closed.

Like a householder who closes up for the night. God will shut the door. And the reason he will shut it is he wants to protect everyone inside from all evil. See, the only way that heaven can be a place where there is no tears and no pain and no death and no crying is because everyone who has

come in has come in through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But Jesus is saying in words that are only too clear, there is a time coming when the opportunity to enter will be ended. And if you do not use this life to enter by Jesus Christ, the entrance will not be possible on the other side of death.

[9 : 42] This flatly contradicts the idea that there is a second chance. After death. Jesus says, that kind of teaching is no kindness, it is a cruelty. He says there will be many who want to enter after the time of salvation has passed and they just won't be able to.

Many will see the truth and want to be saved when it's too late. Many will want to repent and turn and believe but it will be too late. Many will wake in the other world and suddenly be convinced of the truth that they've refused to believe or put off believing in this world.

And so Jesus says, and it's very clear in the original, strive to enter that narrow door now. Here's the question. Why would Jesus say these things if it weren't true?

If I knew that you were an investor on the stock exchange and I knew that tomorrow the stock exchange would halve in value, which may not be so unusual, and I warned you, next time you saw me you'd be thankful, wouldn't you?

Jesus wants to know with great clarity that we need to strive to enter by that narrow door. It's not enough to be exposed to his teaching. That's not entering.

[10 : 59] I mean, outward contact and inward reception is very different. His desire is that all men and women and all boys and girls enter through that narrow door and come into the safety of his presence.

Very important for us this morning to understand. We don't belong to Jesus by church affiliation and attendance or by years of involvement. We don't enter the kingdom of God accidentally or automatically.

We enter by giving all of ourselves to all we know of Jesus Christ. And I want you to examine yourself this morning as I examine myself and to see if this is the one central issue in your life.

Are you striving to enter that narrow door? Do you know what it is to come to him and to have fellowship with him? Do you understand his grace and his love? Have you experienced his forgiveness and his mercy?

Do you know what it is to strive against those things that would keep you away? Are you striving to enter in? In the end, of course, the question is not the question this man had, will the saved be few?

[12 : 05] The question is, will the saved be you? This is the shape of salvation from our perspective. It's a narrow door that we must strive to enter. A door which one day will be closed.

And I'm aware that there is a hard edge to these teachings. That these are the words of eternal life.

And they need to be balanced by the second paragraph. Because if in the first paragraph Jesus emphasises the narrowness of the door, in the second paragraph now Jesus speaks about the wideness of God's mercy and the depth and the breadth and the length of his love.

When I was at high school during the last century, we were taught that there are two ways of looking at light.

You can describe light as waves and as particles. And just when I was coming to understand it as a wave, the teacher would move over to particles and we went backwards and forwards like this.

But it's a little bit what's going on in these two passages. Jesus has spoken about what salvation looks like from our perspective. But now we move into the mind of God and we see what salvation looks like from his perspective, verses 31 to 35.

[13 : 22] The very instant he stops speaking in verse 31, a group of Pharisees come up to him and tell him that Herod wants to kill him. So for his own best interests he ought to leave this area of Perea and come down to the safety and security of Jerusalem.

Of course when he did that he would be in the power of the Jewish authorities of the Sanhedrin who we know are already plotting to kill him. Still, they were right that Herod did want Jesus dead and anyone who knew what had happened to John the Baptist knew how dangerous Herod could be. But while Herod and all the kings made their plans, Jesus says, my life is controlled by an authority infinitely more high and infinitely more important than Herod. I will complete my ministry in God's time.

I will do what God purposes and until then no one can touch me. In fact, he says in verse 23, it cannot be, sorry, is that 33, it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.

He says, if I'm going to die, there's only one place that's good to die and that's Jerusalem. If you're going to kill a prophet, there's no better place than Jerusalem. I'm perfectly safe out here.

[14 : 32] It's when I go to Jerusalem that I will die. And then suddenly in verse 34, Jesus is overwhelmed by the tragedy of their unbelief.

And we read these words which are some of the most moving and heart-rending words in all of scripture. Verse 34, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you would not.

Behold, your house is forsaken, I tell you. You will not see me until you say, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Jesus speaks for God and he speaks now in the second person to his people.

And he says, he pictures himself as a mother hen who wants to gather her chicks to the safety and security of her wings.

Jesus is deeply moved by the hardness of heart and stubborn resistance of his people. I mean, Jerusalem was the one place on the planet you would expect to receive God's Messiah, wouldn't you?

[15 : 46] I mean, it's the one place that had the law, the one place that ought to be the place of light and truth. But instead, God's people butchered prophet after prophet and that was so deeply ingrained they couldn't resist killing the Son of God.

Jesus opens the heart of God to us with stunning and staggering clarity. And do you know what we see there? We see God's tender, mothering love.

And his desire to make us secure and safe, to draw us to his heart and to protect us from every fox that would devour us. And as Jesus looks to his execution on the cross, he says, this is what salvation looks like from my perspective.

It looks like God going out and reaching to gather us under his wing, cherish us and protect us, to gather us to his very heart.

But he says, it is you who resist and run. You see, every time the word of God is spoken to us, either by prophets of old or by preachers today, God stretches out his wings and opens his heart of maternal kindness.

[17 : 01] But like senseless chicks, we see a worm over here or a grain of seed over there and we turn away. And it is quite astonishing, this passage.

What possible reason could drive the eternal majesty of the eternal God to send his Son to be butchered for us? I mean, what is it that moves God to act like a mother and set aside her dignity for her children?

And what is it? How is it that Jesus can lay aside the Father's love and a mother's concern, which is all tied up together, and give his life for us? But it's not that that astonishes Jesus.

What astonishes Jesus is this, that all that he does and all that God does is of absolutely no use to us whatsoever if we will not come to him.

This is what affects him. But the reason that people are not saved is not because of any meanness or narrowness in God, but because of our own hardness of heart.

[18 : 05] It's not that we're seeking God and because he's stingy, he set up some kind of narrow and difficult way for us to come. No, no, no, no. The opposite is true. He is seeking us.

And it's we who resist him and reject him. One of the beliefs which has caught on in the last hundred years in the West and only in the West is an unyielding belief in our own innate goodness.

It's remarkable. Despite the massive and conclusive evidence to the contrary over the last century, there are many people who continue to believe that we are good at heart.

You know, that deep down, if you dig deep enough, we are basically people who desire the best. So that if anyone's excluded from salvation, it's clearly because God doesn't want the best for us.

Jesus says, that's nonsense. That's completely upside down. It's not God who is unwilling to save. It is we who will not come to Christ to be saved.

[19 : 10] It's not God who is ungracious and unloving. It's we who are unthankful and unresponsive. It's not God who puts up barriers to come in. The barrier to our coming in is our wills that keep us from him.

And Jesus turns to the Pharisees and he says, your house, your house is forsaken. It used to be the place God lived. It used to be the place God's Messiah.

God has abandoned it. And as the Passover approached, these very Pharisees would sing the words, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, declaring how much they wanted the Messiah of God.

Their words condemn them, for they treat God's true Messiah with contempt. He was their only hope, but they would not come to him. In a week's time we celebrate Easter and we too will sing about God's Messiah and his salvation.

As we sing these things and as we hear the readings, they reveal to us this two-sided gospel. The gospel that speaks about the narrow door that we must strive to enter, which will one day close.

[20 : 21] And the gospel that speaks about a love that is beyond our comprehension. A love that is too high and too wide and too deep and too long. A love which opens the wings and heart of God so that we might be melted and brought to him.

And I want to urge everyone this morning, strive to enter by that narrow door. And encourage your friends, ask someone today they're striving to enter by that narrow door.

For he has spread his wings wide to draw us to himself. May God give us the grace that many would find that narrow door before it closes and enter by the cross of Christ.

And so have life. Amen. This digital audio sermon, along with many others, is available from the St. John's Shaughnessy website at www.stjohnschaughnessy.org.

That address is www.stjohns.org.

[21 : 40] On the website, you will also find information about ministries, worship services, and special events at St. John's Shaughnessy. We hope that this message has helped you and that you will share it with others.

Thank you for Economy for List. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you.