

The way in which the question at the beginning of today's gospel is formulated is already in itself somewhat disturbing. An anonymous someone asks Jesus "whether only a few will be saved." The answer Jesus gives is not an optimistic one. He speaks of a narrow door that many will try to enter but will not.

The second part of the reading introduces a similar but different image. It speaks of people seeking access to the home of a friend or neighbour or an acquaintance. When the owner of the house refuses to admit them, they complain somewhat pathetically, "we ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets." The phrase can't cannot help but make us think of Jesus. On the day of judgment, the parable suggests, Jesus will reply to such people, "I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evil doers."

In spite of the emphasis in the gospels on the mercy and compassion of Jesus, his message includes elements of a challenging nature. Like John the Baptist and, before him, the great prophets of Israel, Jesus urges his listeners to undergo a conversion and warns them of the consequences if they refuse to do so.

The Sermon on the Mount is typical of the overall pattern of Jesus's teaching. In it, he offers a positive view of the religious and moral life to which we are called, a life summed up in the beatitudes and in the command to love God and to love our neighbour, including those, Jesus says, who persecute and abuse us.

The end of the Sermon contains a series of warnings. "Not everyone who says, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven," Jesus declares, "but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." And again: "Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rains fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell – and great was its fall."

The gospel is both a gift and a challenge. As a gift, it proclaims the goodness and graciousness of God turned to us in Jesus. In him, God offers us forgiveness and reconciliation, and the possibility of a new and renewed life, a life marked by peace and love.

This positive dimension of the gospel is evoked in today's reading when it refers to the future conversion of the Gentiles. "People will come from the east

and the west, from the north and the south,” Jesus says, “and will eat in the kingdom of God.”

The challenge that marked the preaching of Jesus from the beginning can be summed up in two words, faith and conversion. The faith that Jesus asks of us is faith in God as revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus, faith in Jesus as the Wisdom or Word of God in human form and faith in the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit both of God and of the risen Jesus. Such faith involves us in the whole of our being, mind and heart; it draws us into an ever deepening union with Christ so that we might be able to say, to some degree, with St Paul, “I live now not I but Christ lives in me.”

The conversion to which Jesus invites us involves a turning to him and to his values and teaching. It calls out for a life that corresponds to his. This kind of conversion can take different forms and can occur at different times and in different situations in the course of one’s life.

For some people conversion seems to take place in one dramatic experience. Suddenly God and Christ become real for them. Such an experience can transform a person’s life. For most of us, however, conversion is of a different nature. It is more of an on-going process. New situations, relationships, or

challenges present possibilities that require us to make decisions, decisions that can include a greater commitment to the moral and spiritual values of the gospel. For some people such occasions might even entail a matter of life or death. For many of us, the issues are much less significant in themselves and yet they can have an enormous impact on us. Our experience of them places us before a choice, a choice between a life ultimately oriented to God and the values of the gospel and a life centered more or less exclusively on ourselves.

In today's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, the author says that "the Lord disciplines those whom he loves and chastises everyone whom he accepts." The word "discipline" here needs to be understood in a broad sense. It includes notions like testing or even provoking or stimulating. Life presents us with such occasions on a regular basis. In and through them, God invites us to choose him by choosing what we recognize to be the good and right things to do.