

Calvary Road: The Highway of Holiness

Just to place our reading this morning in context, the passage comes at the end of that great and important body of moral and ethical teaching by Jesus known as “The Sermon on the Mount”. As he draws this teaching session to a conclusion, Jesus focuses on the hard lessons of what it means to really follow his teaching – the demands of discipleship.

The first two verses of our reading are short, but they’re packed with meaning. Let’s just turn to page [***] of our Bibles and look at them again:

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

The poet Robert Frost had something meaningful to say about this:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

These verses tell us that the autoroute of life is the way that leads to destruction. The Christian life may be a high way – a high calling – but it’s certainly not a six-lane highway. We have to commence by finding our way through a narrow gate and the road doesn’t get any easier. Actually, Jesus may have been alluding to the difference between public roads and private roads in his time and culture. Public roads were allowed to be 16 cubits wide whereas private roads were only

allowed to be 4 cubits wide and were usually much narrower – a cubit being equivalent to about half a metre.

There is a very famous picture depicting these two roads [display]. No one knows who first painted it, but lots of copies started to appear in the 1800's. It shows travellers climbing one of two hills. Most choose the wide road on the left that leads up a gentle slope to the top of the lower hill. But at the top of that hill are flames representing destruction. A few travellers choose the narrow road on the right that leads up a steep treacherous trail to the summit of the higher hill. At the top of that hill is a picture of God in heaven.

What immediately struck me about the roads in our picture and the two verses we read, is the absolute nature of the choice we all must face, each and every one of us. The wide road to destruction or the narrow road to salvation. We would all prefer to be given some comfortable middle way, but Jesus doesn't offer us any such option. He didn't intend to! Whatever we do we shall be on one road or the other. The easy way to destruction or the hard way to life.

This idea of a simple choice between two alternatives can be found in the OT. In Psalm 1 for example the way of the righteous who delight in God's Law, bear fruit and prosper is contrasted with the way of the wicked who are driven like chaff before the wind and perish. Jesus elaborates the picture a little. The wide road is easy, there is plenty of room for a diversity of opinions and laxity of morals. It is the road of tolerance and permissiveness with no curbs on thought or conduct. Travellers on this road follow their own inclinations, the desires of the human heart in all its fallenness. These

things do not have to be learned or cultivated – that is why the broad road is easy.

The hard way on the other hand is narrow. Its boundaries are clearly marked. Its narrowness is due to the divine revelation of scripture which restricts pilgrims on this road to what God has told us is true and good. Some have tried to restructure the narrow way and called it Christian liberty, but Jesus didn't and doesn't permit that. The right way is narrow, not because there is a virtue in difficulty on its own account, but because there is only one right way whilst there are an infinite number of wrong ways. Yet in another sense, as Chrysostom pointed out centuries ago, Christ's hard and narrow way is also to be welcomed as Christ's easy yoke and his light burden.

Our reading tells us that the two roads are reached by two gates. The gate leading to the easy way is wide and so it is a simple matter to get onto the easy road. There is no limit to the luggage we can take with us. Our sins, self righteousness and pride don't need to be left behind. On the other hand, the gate leading to the hard road is narrow. We won't have to eat less in order to pass through, but we will have to go on a spiritual diet. We have to look for the narrow gate and it is easy to miss – indeed in another context Jesus said that it was as narrow as the eye of a needle. In order to pass through it we must leave behind everything which will not pass through the gate – sin, selfish ambition, covetousness, even if necessary family and friends. For no-one can follow Christ on this narrow Calvary road unless he has first denied himself.

So how can we find this gate? Well, first of all, let me tell you it's not the door to Holy Trinity, or indeed any other church. Going to church by itself, does not necessarily mean

you are on the right road. Jesus said that he himself was the narrow gate, so all we need to do is repent of our sins and turn to Christ. John's gospel in Chapter 10 and verse 7 tells us that Jesus said that he was the gate and every one who entered by him would be saved. Indeed I think this interpretation is also implicit in our text today, because in the view of many scholars the Greek of verse 13 could be better translated "enter through THIS narrow gate" – surely a clear allusion to Jesus as the gate.

One problem is that there are false prophets who give bad directions that can cause travellers to miss the Jesus gate and end up on the wrong road. How can we avoid that? Make sure we study the guide book – The Bible.

Jesus also tells us here that the easy way entered by the wide gate leads to destruction. He did not define exactly what he meant by destruction and I believe the exact nature of hell is as much beyond our understanding as the precise nature of heaven. But, destruction sounds pretty bad – because we were created for life and not death. It is a prospect too awful to contemplate without tears. The broad road is the suicide road. The problem is that this broad suicide road doesn't have a signpost saying "hell" – the devil is the 'Father of lies' and the sign on the broad road reads "heaven".

By contrast, the narrow gate leads to life, even to that eternal life which Jesus explained in terms of fellowship with God, beginning here in this world and perfected hereafter.

So let's just take a moment here for a summary of what we've learnt so far. Jesus tells us that there are only two ways to live our lives, the hard way and the easy way – there is no middle

way. These ways are reached through two gates, a broad gate for the easy way and a narrow gate for the hard way – there are no other gates. These two gates and the roads they lead to end in two different destinations. The easy way and the broad gate leads to destruction and the narrow gate and the hard way leads to life. There are no other destinations. I hardly need to say that this kind of talk is very unfashionable in these post-modern relativistic times. People like to be uncommitted. To say that there is no middle way is to be labelled an extremist or a fanatic. Everybody resents being faced with the necessity of a choice. But I tell you kindly, but firmly, this morning there is no alternative, Jesus will not allow us to escape a choice. To fail to turn to Jesus and enter the narrow gate is to choose the easy way to destruction by default.

Christianity is not about being very good or very bad. It is about choosing the narrow road which opens out into God's kingdom or staying out of God's kingdom by choosing the broad road to the dead end of destruction. So which gate will you choose. The good news is that it's never too late to make the choice of turning to the narrow gate, the Jesus gate.

But what happens if we fall off the narrow road? What happens when we sin or are disobedient? Well there is a simple answer. All we need to do is to repent of our sins and humbly turn back to Jesus and Our Lord will set our feet firmly back on the narrow road.

So let's now move on to look at the second part of our reading from verses 24-29. This is the story about one house that was built on the rock and another that was built on sand that I'm sure will be familiar to most of you. At first sight, you might think that this story doesn't have much in common with the

two earlier verses we've just been analysing, but as we look deeper, I think you'll see that this is really just an exhortation to apply the first teaching.

Here Jesus is really just emphasising the importance of our response to his teaching and message. That aspect is actually made clearer in Luke's account of this parable, where Luke emphasises the depth of the foundations made by the builder for the house rather than the site chosen for it by the builder as in our reading. Both of the housebuilders represent people who hear Jesus' teaching but differ in their response to it. The builder who builds his house on the rock represents the man who hears Jesus' teaching and puts it into practice, whereas the man who builds his house on sand is one who hears but ignores the teaching of our Lord.

The different effects they experience are thus likened to what happens when we are either obedient or disobedient to Christ's teaching. I'm sure I don't need to spell out which kind of house represents obedience and which disobedience!!

Living is building. Some build feebly – mere huts and shanties – others build substantial houses or even mansions. But, whatever we build, we cannot escape the results of our building. They will either be a shelter to protect us or fall in ruins about our ears. Note that Jesus makes no reference to the size of the house or how luxurious it is, what fittings and ornamentation it had – only to its foundation. Foundations make all the difference – look at the leaning tower of Pisa! Let us make sure we always build on the solid foundation of Jesus and scriptural teaching and our obedience to them.

Here Jesus says that storms will reveal whether we have a true foundation or not. They will reveal whether we have absorbed and obeyed his teachings or not. Jesus is warning seriously against any false or even superficial profession of allegiance to him. I believe that the storms he refers to are both the storms of life and the final judgement, because in Jewish writings a storm always serves as a representation of the final judgement – see for example Ezekiel 13:11. For most Christians storms will come during their life here on earth. But, whatever we experience here, none of us can escape the final judgement before the Bema, the judgement seat, of God. At that final judgement many will cry “Lord, Lord” from beneath the wreckage of their life’s house and Jesus will say I never knew you. How tragic. Each one of us needs to make sure that we truly know Jesus. It’s easy to fool me or other members of the congregation, or even Peter. All we have to do is learn the right words and a few conventions. But that won’t fool Jesus – he sees our hearts. I hope all of us will examine our hearts by the standards Jesus lays down. May we respond like his original hearers at the end of our reading:

“When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.”

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 3 We are, each one of us God’s building and that building must be erected on a solid foundation and the only ultimately solid foundation is Jesus.

Our reading this morning does not teach that the way of salvation, the way to enter the kingdom of heaven, is by good works or even by obedience. The whole of the NT makes it

clear that salvation only comes through the sheer grace of God. Let me say that again: salvation is by Grace not by works so that no one can boast. What Jesus is stressing here – as the epistle of James also stresses – is that those who truly hear and receive the gospel will always obey Jesus and express their faith in good works.

The issue of the Lordship of Christ is as relevant today as when he originally preached the sermon on the mount. In this season of Lent, think carefully about what road you are going to travel, about what foundation you will build your life upon. If you have not already done so, I urge you all to go through the narrow gate, to embark on the hard road, and to receive Jesus as your Lord and Master and Saviour even now today.

Let's close with a few words of prayer. Heavenly Father, I pray that if there are any here today that do not know your Son Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, that You would draw them unto Yourself, by Your grace O' Lord. Jesus, you have entreated us to turn to you, to enter through you onto the narrow way which leads to eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. We pray that you will give us the courage and strength to go through that narrow gate and remain on the hard way, repenting and returning when we fall off, and expressing our faith in completing the good works you have prepared for us, until we have reached the place you have prepared for us in your kingdom. Amen