



August 25, 2013

Twenty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time

"I come to gather nations of every language; they shall come and see my glory."—Isaiah 66:18

Dear Friends;

Who will see God face to face? Are they many or few? Are they like us or different from us?

People like the idea of belonging to defined groups whether a club, team, religious or national identity. In a healthy sense membership in a group provides the comfort of sharing common experiences. It strengthens our identity and focuses the group for common purpose. In an unhealthy sense, group identity can become exclusionary, elitist and narcissistic.

We can see both healthy and unhealthy impulses in the group identity of God's people throughout its history. For the ancient Israelites, Yahweh was their God and no one else's God. Other people had their gods. Yahweh was for the children of Abraham alone. The chosen people were an exclusive club. They were 'set apart' from everyone else—that was the meaning of the Hebrew word for 'holy.' All the ritual purity and dietary laws were meant to keep them apart. Contact with non-Jews contaminated the purity of the chosen race.

This attitude begins to break down after several disasters. The first is the nation splits into two. Next the northern Kingdom is conquered by the Assyrians and the people are scattered. Then later the southern kingdom is conquered. Jerusalem and its Temple are destroyed. But eventually the conquerors of the south, Babylon are conquered by Persia. The Persian emperor allows the people to return to the south and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. So dramatic is this that the Prophet Isaiah will call the Persian ruler, Cyrus, God's anointed—messiah.

God's people learn from this experience. First that Yahweh is the only God. Yahweh is God of all nations and peoples. Secondly, God can choose to work through whomever God chooses—child of Abraham or a Gentile. In today's first reading, Isaiah has a prophetic vision. God will gather from the whole world the descendants of Abraham who have been scattered over the centuries by violence and war. And when the peoples of the earth see that God is faithful to his people, they will recognize in him a reliable patron to whom they also can turn.

Every four years the Olympics are celebrated. The opening and closing ceremonies are marked by the great procession of athletes. Men and women from nations all over the globe march together in a diverse display of universal unity. For the duration of the games the world unites in looking on in admiration and appreciation. It is just such an image which Isaiah is offering us today. He sees a great parade of nations on pilgrimage to Jerusalem where they will unite in giving praise and glory to God.

The question asked Jesus in our passage from Luke shows that the elitist tendency did not disappear with Isaiah's revelation. In Jesus' day many still referred to Gentiles as "dogs." Jesus affirms that all are invited to the kingdom, "they will come from the north and south." But in order to enter the reign of God one must already live out its values. It is not enough to say I know Jesus. He must live in me and I must act as he. The narrow door I must enter is God's universal love and compassion. I must show regard especially to the least and lowest. If I do not love like God, I do not know God. Anyone who loves belongs to God whether they are Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or atheist.

Once, three people were waiting to see if they will be admitted into heaven. When asked by St. Peter what they had done to deserve entrance, the first said, "I was a physician and I helped many people recover from their illnesses." St Peter invited him into heaven. Likewise St. Peter questioned the second person, "Why should I let you enter?" She replied, "I was an attorney who defended the rights of many innocent people." "Welcome to your heavenly home," said Peter. Then he asked the third candidate the same question. The man replied, "I administrated a Health Management Organization (HMO) and I managed to keep health care costs to the bare minimum." St Peter thought for a moment then decided, "You may come in," he said, "but you can only stay for a maximum of three days!"

We are all invited but it is how we respond to that call that has eternal consequences. We as Church are called to be a sign of God's universal love. Recently Pope Francis said that "we long for a Church large enough for all humanity." That is our mission!

Peace,

Fr. Ron

Esta carta está en español el sitio web: www.stannechurchbyron.com