

**THE TWENTY-FIRST (21<sup>ST</sup>) SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME  
YEAR C  
AUGUST 21, 2022**

There is a breed of Christian that holds to the notion that the *wide-road* is the path to the truth, is the path to a perfect world (if not to heaven itself). This is a very strange belief for a Christian to have in light of all the Gospel texts that say the complete opposite. Jesus is recorded in the *Gospel of Matthew* as saying bluntly, “The wide and the easy leads to destruction, and those who go that way are many. The narrow and hard way leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Mt 7:13-14).

Speaking generally, the road widens and grows easier in two basic ways. One, our personal road broadens and smooths as the Christian accommodates more and more and agrees with more and more of the views, the demands, and the morals of secular humanism, by which one might think of as the norms of secular society. And two, our individual road becomes wider and easier when the Christian stops practicing the faith, especially stops practicing lovingly and joyfully, religiously, you might say.

It is accurate to point out that both the first reading from Isaiah (66:18-21) and the Gospel proclamation (Lk 13:22-30) say that people from all over the world and every good soul will enter the narrow gate to supernatural life. You heard the Lord tell the prophet, “I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall see my glory” (Is 66:18). And Jesus said, “Men will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God” (Lk 13:29). This is cause for rejoicing and for hope among all peoples. If only that was the whole story, we would never need to give God a single thought. If only that was the whole story, we might be able to say that we don’t have to go to church and might be able to say that behaviors or claims incompatible with the life of Christian virtue are good and supportable.

But you know that's not the whole story. Here are a few verses that precede and follow today's Isaiah text. "The Lord will come in fire and his chariots like the stormwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the Lord execute judgment, and by his sword, upon all flesh, and those slain by the Lord shall be many. [And the elect] shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men that have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh" (Is 66:15-16, 24). This, too, is cause for rejoicing and thanksgiving to God because by His words God is giving us fair warning and exhorting us to personal renewal.

Then in the Gospel Jesus said similar words that should send shivers down our spines. "You will stand outside [the closed door] saying, 'Lord, open to us.' He will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from; depart from me, all you workers of iniquity'" (Lk 13:25-27).

God wields "a two-edged sword" (Ps 149:6; Heb 4:12; Rev 1:16) of mercy and justice. A text from the *Book of the Apocalypse* is instructive. "I saw one like a son of man. A sharp two-edged sword came out of his mouth, and his face shone like the sun at its brightest. When I caught sight of him, I fell down at his feet. He touched me with his right hand and said, 'Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, the one who lives. Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever. I hold the keys to death and the netherworld'" (Rev 1:12, 13, 16, 17, 18).

So, we come to the crux of the issue, to the point of this homily. In order to be a Christian, one has to be conformed to Christ. What does that mean? St. Paul gives us the answer, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me"

(Gal 2:20). Consider a comment so often leveled as an allegation: “That’s not Christian!” Yet, put that way, the charge is once removed from what is actually at stake. Think about that. There is a level at which our references to being Christian and to Christianity is speaking to one’s religious community, to one’s institutional association. The general term sounds corporate in character. If we think ourselves sociologically Christian, culturally Catholic, we are thinking ourselves once removed from the narrowest way. Because the word *Christian* – as used in common parlance – covers a lot of ills. *Christian* is a brand-name; it’s a second-order designation that can be a dodge.

The question we have to ask ourselves – the question St. Paul asked of himself – is, “Am I being Christ?” Not, “Am I being a Christian,” rather, “Am I being Christ?” And the only way you will ever be able to answer that question is if you first know Christ well-enough to see or not see him in yourself, in your beliefs, in your actions, in your values, norms, and opinions. The superficial won’t cut it. The social norms are wrong. The broad way won’t get us anywhere.

If *Christian* is the identifying term or standard, it will leave the individual an awful lot of “wiggle room,” because not all Christians believe in common. However, if Christ, the person, is the source of identity and the standard, then the individual conscience will evaluate actions, values, norms, and opinions very, very differently because the individual will be evaluating and thinking in terms of the singular person of Christ Jesus and not in any broader, associative context.

When Jesus cautioned that he does not know where some people come from, he doesn’t know because those people did not know him. Christ Jesus knows disciples who authentically, deeply, know him. Even though a person may “eat and drink in his presence” and “hear his words in

Scripture,” that individual may not really know Jesus. To know the Lord intellectually is not to know him; to know the Lord vaguely, as a nice thing to ponder, is not to know him.

To consider oneself a Christian, a Catholic, a ‘member of the club’ is one thing, to be another Christ is something else entirely. That’s someone the Lord will know from where he’s come.

To become like Christ is to walk the narrow and hard way. For us, it’s the only way.