

Our passage from the Gospel of Matthew this evening is easily misunderstood. The contrast between “narrow” and “wide” is powerful if it is taken in context. It does not invite a narrow attitude towards the world, nor does it condemn a wide acceptance that all of us are God’s children and we all are neighbours one to another. Heaven knows that after two thousand years, the last thing the Church needs is an invitation to be narrow. That is a false invitation that tragically has been accepted over and over again. In the Inquisition, shunning, excommunication, burning at the stake, and the horrors of today’s Christian Nationalism, their proponents all have chosen a narrow way, that let us be clear is antithetical to the narrow way Jesus is exhorting us to follow. Taking the narrow way has too often been taken as the rationale for exclusion and for persecution of the excluded; neither response is anything other than an outrage, especially if practiced in the name of Jesus.

Let us think of the context of our reading. It comes towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount. I remind you that the Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes. Everything that follows in the sermon has to be understood in the context of the Beatitudes. While most of the rest of the sermon is composed of ethical injunctions, those injunctions have to be understood in light of Jesus’ guiding principles that are the Beatitudes: *‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

But even these guiding principles have to be understood in the context of the first great commandment and the second like unto it: You shall love the Lord your God...and your neighbour as yourself. It is also important to note the verse immediately before our passage: *‘In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.* Where in the Beatitudes or in the commandments or in the Golden Rule, do we find permission for exclusion, for persecution, or, for that matter, for self-righteousness? Answer? Nowhere! What does Jesus ask of us: to be meek, to hunger after righteousness, to be merciful, to be pure in heart, to be peacemakers. And here is where exclusion and persecution comes in. We are blessed if we withstand persecution and exclusion for Jesus sake; we have absolutely no permission to practice exclusion and persecution for that is to take the wide road, the easy way.

Before I go further, let me tell you that in my first week of seminary well over forty years ago, one of the most life-changing things I learned was the real meaning of righteousness. Then and

even more so now in popular culture on the rare occasion the word righteousness is used, it appears as part of a compound word self-righteousness – people who are proud, boastful, and think they know better. But in the Hebrew scriptures, to be righteous or the quality of righteousness referred to someone or a society that was in right relationship to God and neighbour. Right relationship means sharing the resources available, claiming nothing more than one needs, respecting the differences of others. Righteousness is synonymous with justice – justice not in the narrow sense that is played out in law courts, but justice in regard, in care, and in oneness with all God's creation – not separate and definitely not above it.

So what can we say about the narrow gate and the wide gate from our reading this evening? Well our passage implies that we can choose and that is true for most of us. But we need to recognize that at least some who have chosen the wide road have so monopolized resources that for many in this world the narrow gate is the only one open to them. That is why we have *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. Yes there can be those who are poor in material things who are rich in spirit. But for most who lack the material for basic existence, poverty in the things to sustain the body creates poverty of the spirit. I am one generation removed from quite desperate poverty, I know something of what I speak.

So for those who truly have a choice of which gate to pass through, the narrow gate is to follow Jesus. To do so requires effort, sacrifice, and often courage, that is why the narrow gate is hard even though it leads to life. The road is easy through the wide gate. Having passed through it is a herculean task to reverse course to avoid the inevitable destruction.

There is a phenomenon identified by the late American psychiatrist, Robert Lifton called doubling. Doubling is dividing the self into functional halves. He particularly noted the phenomenon in doctors in Nazi Germany who actively participated in the holocaust and in killing the mentally and physically handicapped. Their "Auschwitz" self allowed them to actively participate in the evils of the concentration camp, while their other self was a good person, loyal, disciplined, and a good family man

We are all capable of "doubling". If I can successfully double, I can exploit people and resources throughout the week, and turn up on Sunday for service feeling as though I am a faithful follower of Jesus. Doubling is a very seductive strategy; It makes the wide road even easier. There are many varieties of and roads to doubling. Ultimately doubling becomes pathological and leads to one's destruction. In this passage, Jesus is calling us to be integrated children of God ready to face the challenges of the way through the narrow gate.

Amen