

## The Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time August 21, 2022

Hugo and his atheist neighbor, Vincent, were friends. Though Hugo was Catholic, he enjoyed spending time with his neighbor debating their different views of God and religion.

One day as they were talking, Hugo asked Vincent, "Let's say that you were able to convince me that God didn't exist. How do you think that would make my life any easier?"

Vincent smiled at him and said, "Well, Hugo, if living out your faith isn't hard, maybe you really don't believe in God as much as you say you do." Hugo, becoming indignant asked, "What do you mean?"

"Well," Vincent continued, "it seems to me that if you really believe, you would make sacrifices to live out your faith. Didn't Jesus say, 'If anyone wishes to follow me, he must deny himself and pick up his cross'? If your life as a Christian is easy, then you must not be really following Jesus."

Needless to say, Vincent's words left Hugo with a lot to think about. They should also give us pause as well, especially as we reflect on Jesus' words in today's gospel: "Strive to enter through the narrow gate."

If someone were to convince us that God didn't exist, would it make our lives easier or harder? Does the way we live our faith involve some degree of difficulty and sacrifice? And if we are not making any sacrifices because of our beliefs - if it is not costing us something - then can we really say we believe?

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That is the question that Jesus poses to the man who asks Him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" It is also the question that He poses to us who gather here today with the hope that we will be among those who will be saved.

Jesus doesn't answer the man's question but leaves him with a challenge - strive to enter through the narrow gate. What does that mean?

Jesus tells us that the narrow gate is the path that few people find. Most people in the world are going another way. They have found a way through life that is more pleasant, and maybe even more respectable. Most people have chosen the path of least resistance.

But the same should not be said for the followers of Jesus Christ. We are called to a path that few people follow. It is a path that requires us to love our enemies and to forgive those who harm us. It is a path that requires sacrifice and dedication. There might be times when we see our family and friends following a different path than we are. They might even ask us why we take our faith so seriously. Their lives may seem so much easier and we may wonder if we have made the right choice. But make no mistake. If we want to be in the company of Jesus, the way will not always be smooth and our friends and family won't always be cheering us on.

Jesus goes on to say that many will attempt to enter the narrow gate but will not be strong enough. What does He mean by that? He means that only those who are accustomed to denying themselves and making sacrifices for the good of others will have the strength to make it through the narrow gate. On the other hand, those who run after pleasures and

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whose whole existence is centered on getting what they want, will be too out of shape to push through the narrow gate that leads to life.

Today's second reading speaks to this. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is encouraging us to face the difficulties of life with hope and courage. Believing in God does not guarantee an easy life for us. The cross will always be a part of Christian life just as it was a part of Jesus' life. But it is through the cross that we are saved. The challenges and sufferings we face in life strengthen us the way exercise strengthens an athlete. When we accept the difficulties of life with love and courage, then we will have the strength to enter through the narrow gate that leads to life.

Talking about the narrow path, Jesus says something else that we might find hard to understand. He says that, when people knock on the door, He will say, "I do not know where you are from." But how can that be? Doesn't Jesus know and love everyone? What can He mean when He says, "I do not know you"?

Often throughout the Bible, when it is said that one person "knows" another person, it suggests not just recognizing who a person is but having real, intimate knowledge of that person. In fact, when the Bible wants to describe a man making love to a woman, it will say that he "knew her". So, Jesus is saying to the people listening to Him - and to us - that it is one thing to know Him and something altogether different to have an intimate friendship with Him. Knowing about Jesus is not enough to get us through that narrow gate. We must have a close relationship with Him as well.

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How do we get that intimate friendship with Jesus? We have to spend time in prayer, reading the Bible, and asking the Holy Spirit to reveal to us the mind and heart of Jesus Christ. We also have to commit to living in a way that is consistent with His love and mercy. Jesus tells us, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (Jn 14:15). Also, it is extremely important that we receive the Sacraments of Confession and Eucharist as often as possible. The sacraments are real, life-changing encounters with our Risen Lord. When we receive the sacraments, we receive Jesus. There is no more intimate way to be with Jesus than through the sacraments.

If we really believe in God, then it should make a difference in the way we live. It should cost us something. Jesus' words are not meant to scare or intimidate us. Rather, they are meant to encourage us to take the narrow path that few people find. He wants us to be strong enough to walk the way of the Cross, the way that He walked for us. And, more than anything else, He wants us to know Him as our Savior and as our friend, so that we can spend eternity with Him.