

**21<sup>st</sup> Sunday Year C**  
**Fr Peter Groves**

Luke 13.22-30

*“Strive to enter by the narrow door” (Luke  
13.23)*

For anyone who needs double figures to record their age, the spectacle of Britain doing so strikingly well in the Olympic Games does take some getting used to. It's not entirely clear which is the more surprising – that the British should be the acknowledged best in the world in so many sporting events, or that teaching a horse to dance or kicking someone in the head while wearing pyjamas should count as Olympic sport. As the football season is now underway, I and other fans are painfully reminded of just how much greater is the achievement of those who train for long hours every day for four

years, with little if any financial reward, by comparison with a young man paid a year's salary every week to train for two or three mornings and play one competitive game.

Today's gospel taps into such a theme. Hard work and effort seem to be the order of the day. Jesus is on his long journey to Jerusalem, the journey that takes up roughly half of Luke's entire gospel, and someone asks him a reasonable sounding question, a question we might all be quick to pose if we thought the judgement of God was near: "Lord, will those who are saved be few?"

The answer is not comfortable. "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the householder has risen up and shut the door, you will begin to stand outside and to knock at the door,

saying, 'Lord, open to us.' He will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.'"

This passage is a knotty one, not least because of the number of apparently familiar images it presents. First of all we have the narrow door. We've heard of that before, be it door or gate, and we're used to confronting the challenge of Jesus that the Kingdom makes demands upon us, demands of nothing less than everything, demands we are constantly being called upon to meet. But this narrow door quickly changes from an entrance which is open, if difficult to access, to a way that is barred because the door has been slammed and locked shut, and we, it seems, are on the outside asking the impossible, begging to be let in through the portal that has already been fastened against us.

There is some odd phraseology here. “When once the householder has risen up and shut the door, you will begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us.’ He will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’” Why should the householder rise up and shut the door. Most of us shut the door before we retire. When we rise, it’s to open the door the next day. Slightly strange. Also note the choice of words in the exchange. Those addressed by the story – Jesus’ own hearers, and each one of us – plead their entry by calling the householder “Lord” – “Kyrie” – a normal Greek address for a person of honour, but also the Gentile word for the God of Israel, and the New Testament’s repeated description of Christ. A great theologian once said that the entire New Testament could be summarised by the phrase “Jesus Christ is Lord” and he was not far wrong. And think also about what the householder

says. He doesn't answer "I don't know who you are", he says "I don't know where you come from". This, too, is slightly strange.

So what's going on? Let's take the last point first. "I don't know where you come from" seems to imply that where you come from is what matters. Something about geography or ethnicity is being implied, and such an implication is far from foreign to the scriptures, because another of the New Testament's repeated themes is that the Israel of God, his chosen people, has been redefined by the person of Jesus Christ. The rest of our gospel passage supports that view, for those who are excluded are told that they will witness people come from North and South and East and West to sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The patriarchs, those great ancestors who define the Lord's chosen people of Israel, are supping at the heavenly banquet not

with their fellow countrymen, but with people of every race. The new Israel of God will supplant those who thought they had inherited an entrance ticket simply by their birth.

But even if those who are excluded are those who had taken their inclusion for granted, the reason for their missing out has still to be determined. And here, I think, St Luke's love of allegory comes to the fore. Notice again the phrasing: "When once the householder has risen up and shut the door". Risen up. That verb – *egerthe* in Greek – is exactly the verb and exactly the form most frequently used in the New Testament to refer to the resurrection of Jesus. If the householder who is called "Lord" has risen up, then those who seek entry are expected to respond. When they do answer, they complain to the householder that they are well known to him - we ate and drank in

your presence, and you taught in our streets. But the gospel of Luke has shown us over and over again Jesus teaching in the streets and sitting at table with those who fail to hear his message. We should now be clear who the householder is. The challenge of the narrow door, then, is the challenge of response to the resurrection of Jesus, the challenge to those who thought they were already on the inside, to respond to the new creation, the overthrowing of the old order of things, which announces and defines God's saving act in inaugurating the Kingdom in his Son Jesus Christ. Were we to read further in chapter thirteen, we would find Jesus telling the Pharisees, only seven verses later, "I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I come to fulfilment." It is that fulfilment, the new life of the third day, which the old Israel is failing to recognise.

Such an allegorical reading may make sense of Luke's intention but it should not bring us easy comfort, because here and now that gospel addresses us. We are in danger of being those on the outside if we take for granted the new life of Easter into which we were baptised. This is not a simple matter of rational decision, as if the act of believing that the resurrection took place is all we need. The challenge is not to decide something, but to do it, to live as those who believe, to show by our lives that the love which conquers death is something real, something transformational, something which defines our own lives and everything we do. The heavenly banquet to which we are invited is enacted here this morning in the sacrament of the eucharist, and yet we can receive and accept that invitation and still carry on regardless, at times pale imitations of that which we are called to be, a faithful disciple, a follower of and



participant in the unfailing love of Christ. As we rejoice in the love God showers upon us we are also called up short by the urgency of his call, by the needs of our neighbour and the agony of the world, the call to strive for the Kingdom of God. Fortunately, for those of us who are not quite of Olympic standard, Jesus also reminds us that some who are last will be first and some who are first will be last. There is, perhaps, hope for us all.