

**REFLECTIONS FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 21 August 2022**  
**The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale**

“I am coming to gather all nations and tongues” (Is 66:18) and “Strive to enter through the narrow door” (Lk 13:24). These two passages from today’s Liturgy of the Word seem to send us contradictory messages, one from the book of Isaiah and one from the Gospel of Luke. Yet both messages speak to inclusion, engagement, and encounter in the sacred communion of all creation.

The passage from Isaiah comes from the end of that book, written in the time of the return of the people of Judah from their exile in Babylon. The whole book of Isaiah is amazingly inclusive. In most books of the Old Testament, there is a focus on the people of Israel as God’s chosen ones and on the relationship between God and this people. Even today, followers of Judaism do not seek converts and are slow to embrace those who wish to convert to the religion. This is most unlike Christianity and Islam, both of which believe that they are meant to strongly encourage converts to their religious traditions.



However, in the book of Isaiah, we encounter a God who reaches out to include all peoples and nations among the chosen ones. Indeed, as we just read, God comes to gather all nations and tongues! Yes, it will be all the people – whether they are rich people coming on horses and chariots and dromedaries or poor people coming on mules. In their coming, they join the children of Israel who offer a grain offering on a clean vessel in the house of the Lord (Is 66:20). Indeed, many of them become leaders of God’s people.

Psalms 117, the shortest of all the psalms in the Book of Psalms, repeats this same sense of inclusion of all – “Praise the Lord, all you nations! Extol the Lord, all you peoples! For great is the Lord’s steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever” (Ps 117:1-2). All peoples and nations are included in God’s steadfast love and faithfulness, and they are included for all time!

Jesus echoes this same teaching found in the passage from Isaiah when he says that “the people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the Kingdom of God” (Lk 13:29). But Jesus, in this passage, reminds us how the passage from Isaiah begins, “For I know their works and their thoughts” (Is 66:18). Although God’s invitation reaches out to everyone, it is an invitation, and it can be accepted or rejected. Each one is invited, and each one has the freedom to choose the response.

That response cannot be tokenism, but it must be made from the depths of our being in integrity and in truth. Jesus says that just because one is a member of the people of Judah is not enough. We can add further that just because we call ourselves Christians or Roman Catholics or members of religious institutes is not enough. Indeed, Jesus uses the powerful metaphor, “Strive to enter through the narrow door” (Lk 13:24) to remind us that not everyone who knocks on the door will be admitted. The writer to the Hebrews uses a different metaphor for the same message, “Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees and make straight paths for your feet for what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed” (Hew 12:12-13).



The Lord knows the works and thoughts of all who are called. We are called to make straight paths for our feet. Jesus cautions us that the door to enter is narrow.

That way through the narrow door is a way of peace, love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The prophet Micah tells us so simply that the only way is “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8). In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus gives us another set of simple directions, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matt 25:35-36).

In John, Jesus reminds the disciples and us, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). In today’s passage from Luke’s Gospel, we learn that key to walking in the way, the truth and the life is inclusion. Pope Francis speaks so often about “the art of encounter” and “a culture of encounter.” In his encyclical letter, *Fratelli Tutti*, he says:

Seeing ourselves from the perspective of another, of one who is different, we can better recognize our own unique features and those of our culture: its richness, its possibilities and its limitations. . . Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word “dialogue”. . . Each of us can learn something from others. No one is useless and no one is expendable. This also means finding ways to include those on the peripheries of life. For they have another way of looking at things; they see aspects of reality that are invisible to the centres of power where weighty decisions are made.

In his previous Encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis includes all creation in that call to encounter: “Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth.” In shaping this culture of encounter, Pope Francis calls us to ecological wisdom, “respecting all creatures as valuable for their own sake in the eyes of God and not assessing them only as opportunities for exploitation. To see all creatures as our sisters and brothers is to value the interconnectedness of our universe.”

In the present journey to the *Synod on Synodality*, we are further encouraged to engage in shaping a culture of encounter, “Encountering faces, meeting eyes, sharing an individual’s history represents the closeness that Jesus embodies, and no question annoys or disturbs him, because he is open to encounter. Every encounter, as we know, calls for openness, courage, and a willingness to let ourselves be challenged by the presence and the stories of others. Encounter, listen and discern.”



During this coming week, let us reflect on the ways in which we are striving to enter that narrow door, responding to God's invitation to be one with all in the sacred communion of all creation. For many of us, "drooping hands and weak knees" are not just a metaphor – they are our everyday realities. In the midst of these realities, how does each one of us cultivate the art of encounter, shape a culture of encounter? How do we approach, speak to, listen to, look at, come to know, and understand one another? How and where do we encounter, listen, and discern? How do we continue to spread the good news wherever we find ourselves at this time in our lives?

There is a lovely hymn written by Marty Haugen entitled "All Are Welcome" which speaks to the essence of encounter.

Let us build a house where love can dwell  
and all can safely live,  
a place where saints and children  
tell how hearts learn to forgive.  
Built of hopes and dreams and visions,  
rock of faith and vault of grace;  
here the love of Christ shall end divisions.  
All are welcome, all are welcome,  
all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where prophets speak,  
and words are strong and true,  
where all God's children dare to seek  
to dream God's reign anew.  
Here the cross shall stand as witness  
and as symbol of God's grace;  
here as one we claim the faith of Jesus.  
All are welcome, all are welcome,  
all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where love is found in water, wine and wheat:  
a banquet hall on holy ground where peace and justice meet.  
Here the love of God, through Jesus, is revealed in time and space;  
as we share in Christ the feast that frees us.  
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where hands will reach beyond the wood and stone  
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach, and live the Word they've known.  
Here the outcast and the stranger bear the image of God's face;  
let us bring an end to fear and danger.  
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard  
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words within the Word.  
Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace,  
let this house proclaim from floor to rafter.  
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

**Choose one phrase from this hymn to hold in your heart this week, letting it invite you to grow in the art of encounter. Write a new verse which includes all created beings.**

