

Christianity makes a radical statement about the truth of the human person. It is this: There is no higher calling in life than to know and to love God. No matter who you are, what your background is, what your financial status is, what your health is, what your family is like, or whatever you may be feeling inside, everyone is given the opportunity to know and love God. And there is no greater glory, no greater pursuit, no thing in this life that is more vital to your very existence, than your relationship with God. With Christ, the poorest of the poor become rich. Without Christ, the billionaire is left empty and miserable. With Christ an ill person finds peace. Without Christ, the most vigorous person has no rest. Everyone is called, but you have to choose and pursue your purpose.

To sociologists, religion is a code of ethics tied together by a common set of values and beliefs that unite a group of people through ritual. That is true for many religions. But Christianity is more than a set of common values, an ethic, and rituals, it is about a relationship with the one who brought you into existence. Even more, the Church claims that the whole point, the whole purpose of our lives here on earth, is to cultivate this relationship. Our families and our work, our values, ethics, and rituals, are the means for us to go deeper into the purpose of our existence – knowing and loving God.

The readings this weekend cannot be properly understood without this perspective. The scripture presents us with way to evaluate if we are serious about the purpose of our existence.

The first reading from Isaiah presents us with a wonderful image of great joy. It speaks about a time when God dwells with his people – a heavenly image – and not just the Jews, but people from every corner of the world who have come to know God will come and gather together. It is an expansive vision that is meant to show us that salvation is not about membership of a tribe or being part of the right religious group, it is about each individual's response to God's call. In this case it is to show that a person isn't saved because he or she is a Jew, but because they have responded to highest purpose in life – knowing and loving God.

The Gospel from Luke takes this prophetic image and presents it again from an inverse perspective. In a parable Jesus describes someone who falsely presents himself as having a relationship with Christ being turned away because it isn't true. And then standing there, he will see people from all over the world embraced by Christ and he will be left out in the darkness. The parable reveals an important truth – our judgement is not a trial where we can argue that we deserve heaven. No, our judgement has no room for manipulation and lies. It is much simpler. Rather, have you pursued knowing and loving God? Can you be recognized as someone who has taken the most important thing in life seriously? It cannot be faked.

The truth of the readings is this: you cannot judge who will be saved. However, you can do something about how you live your life according to this high calling. These readings are not meant to make you comfortable, but to challenge you to live your life according to the high calling you have received. It is entirely possible to have sat through mass your whole life and to not know Christ. To say, "but I've heard the Bible read, I've eaten in your presence." But for Jesus to say, "I do not know you." These readings are not for someone else, they are meant to challenge you and me personally.

I was once on a retreat which was being directed by a very holy priest who gives retreats to priests and bishops. He tells the story of having reminded a group of bishops about their high calling to know and love God. He came into the chapel later on in the evening and there was a bishop of a large diocese lying on the floor and sobbing. Fr. Gene came to him and asked, "What has happened?" The bishop replied, "I have been a priest for decades and a bishop for a number of years, and I just realized, I do not know Jesus Christ. I talk about him, I preach about him, I look at images of him everyday, but I have not made an effort to know and love him."

I think about this story often. It is possible to be a priest who doesn't know Christ. I do not want that to be the case. I know that I have pursued my relationship with Christ passionately at times. At other times in my life I have just treated the priesthood as a job – a routine. Every day I must choose to push deeper and not go through the motions.

Each one of you is here because you have some notion that your ultimate purpose in life is to know and love God. However, everyday you must choose once again to pursue your relationship with God. Otherwise, it is possible to just go through the motions of religion without the fire of its purpose.

Jesus answered them, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough."