

## March 23 2025 - Rev Dr Don Owers

Someone has said that “Avoidance is the best short-term strategy to escape conflict and the best long-term strategy to ensure suffering.” (Rpt) The more I think about I think that’s true. I can certainly recall instances where I have put off making a difficult decision and have suffered the consequences in the long run.

I don’t think I’m alone in this, how many of us have put off going to the dentist because, who knows, that aching tooth might get better on its own? That’s a relatively benign example, but sometimes we need to make a choice which may involve some short-term cost but which has long term consequences, either for good or for ill. These decisions can be really difficult and we often experience conflict within ourselves, and most of us (me included) have learned to make use of avoidance techniques – ie ways we’ve learned to avoid having to make a decision at all.

I want to say something now that may surprise you. I want to suggest to you that if we look through the gospel accounts of his life, we find that an encounter with Jesus often creates conflict for people. We also find that people often try, in various ways, to avoid grappling with the challenges Jesus puts before them. We have two examples in our Gospel reading today (Luke 13.22-35). The first example is an individual who raises a question with Jesus; the second involves a number of groups that wield power in the culture of the day – the power of the state exerted by Herod, the religious and social influence of the Pharisees, and the fickle power of the mob in Jerusalem.

Our passage begins with Luke telling us that Jesus is going through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. In one place, someone approaches and asks, “Lord, will only a few be saved?”

What do you think prompted this question? It seems to come out of the blue. Most probably Jesus’ reputation had preceded him, and now, all of a sudden, here he is in this particular village – here’s the one who people are hailing as God’s messiah, the one who teaches with authority, who heals the sick and drives out evil spirits. It’s an encounter, I think, that provokes a conflict for this person. ‘What to do – to follow Jesus, which seems compelling, but apparently involves the surrender of one’s life – or to hold

back and perhaps miss out on the promises that Jesus makes to those who trust in him?’

What to do? Well, this person invokes a time-honoured way to avoid making a decision and that is: Ask an irrelevant question – one which sounds more or less interested but which is really seeking to shift attention away from something challenging. So this person asks: ‘Lord, will only a few be saved?’

People so often do this, even today, when confronted with who Jesus really is. Almost any question will do, as long as it might deflect the challenge that an encounter with Jesus puts before us. ‘What about all the people who follow other religions, what happens to them?’ Or ‘What about evolution – or the big bang theory (either will do). Some questions are good questions in themselves, for example, questions about the suffering we see in the world – but even good questions can be used as an avoidance technique.

Jesus doesn’t answer the question, instead he forces his questioner back to the need to make a decision. He responds: “Strive to enter through the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.”

It seems pretty clear that the narrow door represents the door of opportunity that God is offering in Jesus for people, then and now, to enter the kingdom of God or, to put it another way, to be saved. It’s narrow in the sense that opportunities may be limited. The door may close. The implication is that people need to take the opportunities God presents to them.

‘Struggle to enter . . .’ Jesus tells his questioner. The word struggle translates the Greek verb ‘agonizdomai’ from which we get the English ‘to agonise’. This agonising that Jesus speaks of doesn’t mean that the door is hard to open, on the contrary, throughout the New Testament it’s made clear that the door to God’s kingdom is open to all who put their trust in Jesus. The agonising involves our struggle to divest ourselves of those impediments to faith that might prevent us from getting through the door. In my own case it meant divesting myself of what I saw as my right to live my life just as I wished. I knew that to put my trust in Jesus required that he, and not me, must have the right to direct my life. At the time I was single, and well off and, within reason I did what I liked,

and I found it a real struggle to surrender my will and let Jesus direct my life. I suspect I'm not alone in that struggle. The paradox, of course is that, in giving our lives over to his direction we find the abundance of life that Jesus came to bring. Others may struggle with other impediments to trusting Jesus, often these things cling to us like barnacles – and we have to struggle, to agonise even, to scrape them off. But it's not to be avoided.

When Jesus tells this person, 'Strive to enter by the narrow door' it's a present imperative – it's something his questioner needs to act on straight away. But then the scene changes to the future, when Jesus has returned in his glory. Jesus pictures himself as a householder who is holding a celebration or perhaps simply offering shelter, for who have placed their trust in him. Either way the door is now shut - the time of opportunity is over. Those who seek to enter late will be told by the Lord that he doesn't know where they're from, and they will be denied access. In vain they plead some kind of association with Jesus – they listened to his teaching, they may have eaten at the same table, they may have had some interesting conversations – the problem is that they haven't taken the opportunity to put their trust in him, and thereby, effectively, they reject him and thus they leave themselves outside the sphere of the forgiveness and salvation which God offers to us through faith in Jesus.

In and through all this, you will notice, Jesus has turned the question from the impersonal, "Will the saved be few?" to the personal, "Will the saved be you?" That's a question that our reading leaves before each one of us.

The second example of avoidance is provided by the cultural power groups I mentioned earlier - Herod, the Pharisees and the fickleness of the mob in Jerusalem.

The Herod referred to in our passage is Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great and he was just as paranoid and violent as his father. He ruled under the jurisdiction of the Romans but in reality, in that region, he had almost unfettered power and would use it ruthlessly against anyone he perceived as threatening his power. Jesus clearly provoked conflict within Herod and to avoid grappling with the challenge Jesus presents Herod issues a death threat which is conveyed to Jesus by members of a group called the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were a large group spread throughout the cities and towns of Israel. They sought to conform their lives to the Old Testament scriptures, as they interpreted them, and they also tried to make everyone else conform. They were a bit like the church police of the day! They were generally respected by the people, and they had significant influence. On most occasions recorded in the Gospels when they encounter Jesus, the Pharisees experience conflict – they feel their influence will be diminished. They generally try to avoid the challenge Jesus presents by using their influence to attempt to suppress the effectiveness of Jesus' mission, though in this case they enter an unholy alliance with Herod (whom they despised) to try to move Jesus on.

Jesus is determined to fulfil his mission in Jerusalem, and he knows that when he gets there the power of the mob will be used against him. Mobs become energised and irrational when their perceived privileges are threatened, and there are always people who are willing to manipulate mobs in order to achieve their own ends. Mobs, it seems to me, are often a way societies avoid dealing with the challenges that they face. The mob in Jerusalem believed, or were led to believe, that Jesus would threaten the fragile status quo with the Romans, and thus threaten the social and financial security they enjoyed.

Herod, the Pharisees and the mob all, in their own way seek to avoid the challenge of Jesus by actively opposing his mission.

Jesus is not distracted. He has 'set his face toward Jerusalem' (Luke 9.51) and, in his reply to Herod – which also rebukes the Pharisees - he emphasises that he will continue his mission and do so in his time and in his way. That way leads to Jerusalem and the apparent victory of these power groups when Jesus is crucified.

Throughout history, and today, in various places in the world, the power of the State has been used and continues to be used to attempt to avoid the challenge of Jesus by repressing the mission of the church. In a similar way, on occasions, the power of the mob has been utilised and continues to be utilised in attempts to intimidate Christians. In Australia cultural power groups opposed to the mission of Jesus often seem to have significant influence with government and the community and more and more, it seems, stand opposed to the Gospel.

Surveying all this, it might be logical for us to be somewhat dismayed – but we needn't be. You see, there's little doubt that in Jesus day, those cultural powers which sought to subvert his mission thought they had succeeded when he was crucified. But they were to find that wasn't the end of the story! The resurrection of Jesus demonstrates that the cross is not the defeat of God's mission but the defeat of sin and death and, ultimately, the defeat of those cultural powers that oppose God's mission. And, despite opposition, that mission continues. Our part is not to be dismayed or intimidated by opposition or difficulty, but to trust in God's victory and to continue faithfully to undertake our mission, which is the mission of Jesus. I like Archbishop Desmond Tutu's attitude. When asked why he doesn't get dismayed about opposition to the gospel and the suffering it can bring, he smiled and said, 'Ah well, you see, I've read to the end of the book . . . we win!'