

"The Last Laugh"
Text: Luke 13:22-30

8-22-2010

The final score: Northwestern 17, Notre Dame 15. It was the opening game of the 1995 football season, and I'll never forget it. How could I?: Notre Dame hasn't been the same since. It's been a long time since my Irish have been any good. In fact, Sports Illustrated's preseason issue for college football came in the mail recently, and I hardly even looked at it. "Why bother?," I thought. "Notre Dame won't even be listed." (And by the way, they weren't)

Laughter - that's what it's meant being a Notre Dame fan of late; laughter at their fall from "upper echelon" status. But I figure that's O.K. 'Cause anyone who knows anything about college football knows that Notre Dame will be back. And when they are, I will have the last laugh.

That's the way it is with our Christian faith: sometimes it's all any of us can do to keep our heads held high and stand tall for Jesus. Sometimes we feel like we're being laughed at for our faith (as we heard last week: sometimes even by those closest to us). But we will have the last laugh, when at the last great Day - when the Lord Jesus comes again, the whole world will see what we have believed all along: the Lord Jesus coming back to welcome us into life under His Reign. Then we will have, for all eternity, the "last laugh." Let's look at that today.

As we do, we turn to our Gospel lesson for today, where Luke writes that Jesus:

"... went on His way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. And someone said to Him: 'Lord, will those who are saved be a few?'"(Luke 13:22-23)

Now that question, it would seem, is not very different from one we often hear today. People are always wondering about the question of salvation - who will be saved and who won't; how many will be saved, and will it be many or just a few? In Jesus' day, the issue of who was going to be saved was on people's minds just as much as it is in our day.

You had the Jewish people themselves - the people of Israel - who felt that they possessed a status that rendered them more deserving of salvation, given they were heirs of the promises made to Abraham. You had particular groups within the Judaism of Jesus' day - groups who devoted themselves to a more stringent observance of the O.T. Law, who cast a critical, sometimes judgmental eye toward others who were not as stringent as they were in observing it. There was the question concerning non-Jews altogether, and whether or not a gentile could be saved at all. And then also, one could ask whether or not there was a similar kind of scrutiny among the followers of Jesus; from today's Gospel, it appears as though there was. The issue of who was saved and who was not came up in Jesus' day.

But there's something very interesting about the way Jesus addresses that issue in today's Gospel: *He doesn't really address it.* He does NOT answer the question regarding how many people are saved. Instead, He focuses attention back on the person asking the question, saying that they needed to make sure *they THEMSELVES* were saved, saying:

"Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able."(v.24)

Now, Jesus does seem, at first glance, to imply that there won't be many people saved. I mean, He speaks of a "narrow door" and of many people NOT being able to enter by it. But then He goes on to give an illustration to further explain His point, saying:

"Once the Head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and YOU begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying: 'Lord, open up to us!', then He will answer and say to YOU: 'I do not know where YOU are from.' Then YOU will begin to say: 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets'; and He will say: 'I tell YOU, I do not know where YOU are from; depart from Me, all YOU evil doers.'"(vs.25-27)

Note how many times the word "You" occurs in that illustration. Luke is telling us that Jesus was speaking very pointedly to those people who had spoken to Him. And what He said to them was startling, as He told them that if they didn't take care of their own "party," they were going to miss out on all the fun; they were in danger of missing out on the "last laugh" that is eternal life.

Jesus went on to say:

"There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth there when YOU see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God, but *yourselves* being cast out."(v.28)

Jesus didn't "pull any punches" there. He came right out and told it like it was. And why not? Soon He would be hanging on a cross. In fact, that's what Luke means when he says that Jesus:

"... went on His way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem."(v.22)

He means that Jesus was continuing that journey which we've been commenting on these past few months in our weekly Gospel readings - continuing His journey to the cross, with its dark, gloomy pall of death looming ever nearer on the horizon. Jesus didn't have time for games; He didn't have time for laughing. He was about to die, on a cross, for the sins of the world. So He told it like it was, speaking about the "first" & "last" to enter life under God's Reign.

The "first" were the Jews, and anyone else who thought they would be first in line because of their strict adherence to God's Law. The "last" were the gentiles, the so-called "sinners," and anyone else considered "outside" the fold. According to Jesus, *they* were the ones who would be standing at the head of the line at the "Pearly Gates," laughing it up through all eternity, while many of the "children of Abraham" stood outside, doing anything but laughing, but "weeping and gnashing their teeth." (v.28) The ones thought to be first would actually be last, while the ones thought to be last would actually be first. Only the "true followers of Abraham" - i.e., those who journeyed with Jesus - would have the "last laugh."

This speaks very pointedly to us, because we all have times when we're like the people in this text: we don't give much thought to repentance and faith because we feel our salvation is secure. Folks, our salvation *is* secure, *but only because we're journeying through life with Jesus*. We need to learn from what Jesus says in today's Gospel, because all of us would come in last in our race for the "Pearly Gates" if it wouldn't have been for Him.

He took all of our mistakes and made good on them. He took the pain of our sins and payed for them. He is able to take all of the laughter of life and give it to us, because He Himself took the sad, dark, lonely feeling of death to the cross. In short, our Lord Jesus Christ gave up laughter so that all of us could laugh last and best with the "last laugh" that is life under the Reign of God.

That gives us confidence and courage to confess Christ before others, even when it comes to those times when we get "laughed at" for our faith. There are lots of those times, times when people look at us in the weirdest way because of the faith we keep. But Jesus encourages us today to continue keeping that faith, as He says:

"People will come from east and west, and north and south, and will take their places *at the feast* in the Kingdom of God."(v.29)

We are part of that "east / west, north / south populace," coming as often as possible to sit at table with our Lord, along with:

" ... Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God, ... "(v.28) As we do, we "feast in the Kingdom of God"; we enjoy the fellowship of "all the company of Heaven"; we share a 'bit of the "last laugh" of the Reign of God *already NOW*, in Communion with Christ.

And so, as we participate in the "laughter" of God's Reign again today, we do so approaching the Table of our Lord, because the "laughter" of the Reign of God is ours *here & now* in the Body and Blood of His Son. We partake of that "laughter" *every* Sunday, indeed *every time* we hear the good news of Jesus Christ, as the "laughter" that is the blessing of God is spoken to us in His Word. As we receive that Word in faith, we are led to share it with others, to see to it that they too are brought to rejoice in the blessing of life under God's Reign. What a Day that will be, when we all finally do have the last, and greatest laugh, forever. God grant that to us all –

- In Jesus' ✠ Name,
Amen