‘Strive to enter through the narrow door’

There’s a painting by a rather obscure, seventeenth century Dutch artist, in the museum of St Catherine’s convent in Utrecht, which depicts the broad and the narrow way which Luke described in our second reading this morning. I happened to see it while I was there for an early music festival in the summer but it is like many, many others – apparently the subject was especially popular following the Reformation in the Netherlands.

The two ways are vividly depicted on the left and right of a tree, which stands in the middle of the painting: on the left are the devout, modestly dressed faithful, saying their prayers, ministering to the sick and needy, struggling to carry their crosses on an arduous, winding way which leads to a narrow gate. Beyond the narrow gate is a high mountain, circled by a steep, narrow path on which figures, bent under the weight of their crosses, are staggering up to the summit where they will presumably enter the heavenly Jerusalem. The message seems to be that this way is not a way for the selfish, the lazy, the self-interested, or those attached to comfort and luxury: it is not for those who are preoccupied with their own good but with the good of others; those who are prepared to leave the trappings of the world behind, take up their cross, and humbly follow Christ, whatever the cost – indeed, without counting the cost.

In contrast, on the right of the painting, is what looks like the garden of a large, landscaped country house in which well-dressed courtiers disport themselves in a bucolic scene of feasting, music, theatre, games, and carriage rides through a broad, classical gate adorned with statues, which leads into rolling hills.

In the centre of the painting, just beneath the tree, stand a man and a woman. They look as if they have just stepped out of a Rembrandt painting: he wears a cocked hat with a feather, an elaborate lace collar, a velvet doublet and hose and grand boots; she sports a golden silk damask gown, more lace, and is holding an apple.

Of course, they are meant to evoke Adam and Eve, and given that the woman is already holding the apple and is standing on the right-hand side, amidst the jolly courtiers, it appears that she has already made her choice, and is on the broad way that leads to perdition. The man, however, seems poised between the two ways and a simply dressed woman holding a small child is pulling
him by the arm, from the left, towards the narrow way. Just to ensure that we get the message an
angel, with huge wings, gleaming white, stands beside her, with one arm pointing up to the
heavenly Jerusalem and another to the tablets bearing the commandments which lie at their feet.
The message is a stark one: there are two ways: the narrow way and the broad way; the way of
obedience, service and self-denial and the way of eating, drinking and being merry. One leads to
the heavenly Jerusalem; the other to perdition – or what our gospel reading today vividly
describes as ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’: there is fire and smoke awaiting the revellers on the
broad way in the far right hand corner of the picture.

How are we meant to respond to this painting? How did you respond to today’s reading from
Luke, I wonder?

Are we meant to identify with the man in the centre of the painting, pulled on one side by
worldly plenty and on the other by devout simplicity? Are we being invited to observe, to
deliberate and to choose? Are we meant to turn away from contemplating the painting resolved
to follow the narrow way: to live a life of prayer, charity, and suffering for the sake of Christ,
renouncing the world and its delights and temptations?

Actually, I don’t think we are; or rather, I don’t think that our choices and actions are anything
like so simple or clear-cut. I also think that this is why the Christian life can so easily be
misunderstood as a joyless, legalistic, over-pious, holier than thou, even masochistic one.
If we are honest with ourselves, the left hand side of the painting which leads to the narrow gate
isn’t, on first glance, very enticing; the right, with its good food, fine wine, music, theatre, games
and lazy days in the park, lolling under the trees in the sunshine, looks much more inviting. The
irony that I was in Utrecht for a whole week listening to music wasn’t lost on me as I looked at
the painting. So what is going on?

Well, I think that beneath the stark and clear-cut contrast between the two ways is the much
messier, more complicated, hugely ambivalent question of human motivation.
In Murder in the Cathedral, T.S Eliot has Thomas Beckett say “The last and greatest treason is
to the right deed for the wrong reason’.

I would like to reflect, for a moment, on the reason why the Adam figure, poised and pulled in
the middle of the painting, might opt for the narrow way.
Does he look to the horizon and see the heavenly Jerusalem on the one hand and the billowing, smoky fires of perdition on the other and choose the narrow way out of fear? Does he obey the commandments, say his prayers, love and serve his neighbor and carry his cross for fear of punishment; in order to avoid the horrible scenario of weeping and gnashing of teeth? Is that the reason? It is quite possible.

Or does he allow himself to be pulled towards the admittedly less inviting, more demanding narrow way and accept the privations and suffering it entails, because he hopes for reward? Does he keep the laws, pray, do charitable acts and bear his cross for ultimate gain, in order to secure for himself eternal life in the heavenly Jerusalem? Is that the reason? It is, again, quite possible.

Or, is he drawn to the narrow way because he desires it, delights in it, is compelled and constrained to follow it whatever the cost and whatever the suffering, because he finds he cannot not follow it – in short, does he follow the narrow way because he loves it? Is that his reason? Again, this is quite possible.

Reflecting on this passage one of the early Church fathers, Basil of Caesarea, observes that if our actions are motivated by fear of punishment we are really no more than a slave; if they are motivated by a desire for reward, then we are no better than a hired hand or employee who does what is required to obtain his wages; but if our actions are motivated and inspired by love then we are sons.

What does this son-ship entail? How are sons motivated? Why do sons do the right deed for the right reason and follow the narrow way?

The answer, of course, is love. To explain it we must look to the example of God’s love, in Jesus Christ, His Son, who, in self-emptying love descended to accept the narrow way – to endure the constraints of a human body, to suffer and to die in loving obedience to his Father and in loving compassion for us.

What Christ the Son did was not a matter of rationally deliberated choice. Reason would calculate the pros and cons, the possibility of punishment, the potential rewards, and would then perhaps decide that obedience, which entails accepting the constraints and challenges of the narrow way, is the most sensible option.
But love is neither rational or sensible. We all know as parents that we would readily suffer or die for our children in order to spare or save them; we all know as children that we obey, honour and serve our parents because we love them. We have all had the experience of falling hopelessly, helplessly, madly – often irrationally and foolishly – in love, unable to do otherwise, overcome by a delight in the one we love and a desire to be always with them. Love, in other words, has its own laws. And I would suggest that only love would readily, single-mindedly and wholeheartedly choose the narrow way.

: as Shakespeare’s famous sonnet put it:
Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand’ring bark,
Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.
Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle’s compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov’d,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov’d.

Love is, of course, rarely without suffering, without pain, without self-giving and self-denial. But unlike the one who acts out of fear or hope of gain, love alone embraces these things freely. As Augustine paradoxically puts it, ‘You will be free if you become a servant’, by which he means, you will be free if you submit to being enslaved by love.

So let us return to the figure at the foot of the tree, poised between the two ways. I think the lesson of the painting, the lesson of Jesus’ teaching on the narrow gate in our NT reading today, is a lesson in love. The narrow way is the way of love – love of God and of neighbour; the broad way is love of self and the world; one liberates, the other enslaves; one leads to union and participation in God, the other to losing him.
The narrow way, then, is not so much a way of joyless, pious self-denial, renunciation and abstinence as a way of receiving, embracing and holding fast to the love of God. It is not a rationally deliberated choice but a way which we cannot but follow, whatever the cost, because of love. It is to do the right deed for the right reason.