

Flying by commercial airline is not what it used to be. Gone are the days when you could walk up to the airline counter, purchase a ticket, and proceed directly to your gate and walk on the plane. Now we must all queue up and pass through the “narrow gate” of the security checkpoint one-by-one. Approaching the security checkpoint are large signs informing us what items we are not permitted to carry on to the plane. Finally, before passing through the security gate we have to lay any carry-ons on a conveyor belt to be radar inspected, empty our pockets of their contents, remove any metal jewelry, and still in some instances, remove our shoes. Only then, once relieved of our “possessions” are we bid to pass through the body-scan machine.

This experience can help us understand the message of today’s Scripture readings with special emphasis on today’s gospel image of the narrow door.

Unlike modern cities and towns, ancient cities and towns were thick-walled fortresses, the original “gated communities.” Access was through a large gate opened at dawn and closed at dusk. Woe to the town resident who found themselves “shut out” in the night, a ready prey for both animal and human predators who lurked and hunted in the dark. As a safety measure, these cities and towns provided a secret opening or gate concealed somewhere in the wall and known only to the residents. However, this “gate” was very narrow, only large enough to allow an individual, but nothing more, through it. This is the context out of which Jesus delivers his message today.

Recently Pope Francis garnered headlines for stating that even atheists could enter heaven. The Holy Father was making the same point Isaiah in the first reading and Jesus in the Gospel passage make, an invitation to non-believers, a challenge to us who claim to have “faith.”

Henri Nouwen a well-known twentieth century spiritual writer in a reflection I read recently sums up the message of Isaiah, Jesus, and its reiteration by Pope Francis as he writes: “Jesus is the door to a life in and with God. ‘I am the gate,’ he says (John

10:9). 'I am the Way; I am Truth and Life. No one can come to the Father except through me' (John 14:6).

Jesus opened the door to God's house for all people, [even] for those who never heard or will know that it was Jesus who opened it. The Spirit that Jesus sent 'blows where it pleases' (John 3:8), and it can lead anyone through the door to God's house.

What finally counts is not whether we know Jesus and his words but whether we live our lives in the Spirit of Jesus. The Spirit of Jesus is the Spirit of Love. Jesus himself makes this clear when he speaks about the last judgment. There people will ask, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?' and Jesus will answer, 'In so far as you did this to one of the least ...of mine, you did it to me' (Matthew 25:37,40).

This is our great challenge and consolation. Jesus comes to us in the poor, the sick, the dying, the prisoners, the immigrant, the lonely, the disabled, the rejected. There we meet him, and there the door to God's house is opened for us." These "least" are the "narrow door" through which we must pass if we are to enter the Kingdom. This is the "discipline" of the Christian life to which the author of the letter to the Hebrews refers today.

In Jewish tradition following death, the body is washed and then wrapped in a plain white linen shroud for burial—no make-up, no jewelry, no distinctive clothing accompany it. In this the faithful Jew is reminded of the words of Job, "Naked I came forth from my mother's womb, and naked shall I go back there" (Jb. 1:21). The only thing the faithful Jew can take out of this world is the good done for others from the heart, nothing more. So, too, for us.

In wisely investing our time, talent and treasure in service to God in the persons of the least among us we need not worry about having too much "baggage" when the time comes to pass through the security checkpoint at the narrow door of heaven.