

C. S. Lewis on Becoming Little Christs

"Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24).

As I meditated on these words from Jesus in the Gospel reading assigned for the Eucharist today, I compared them to the parallel passage in the Gospel according to Matthew: "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14).

All of this reminded me of a chapter in C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* entitled, "Is Christianity Hard or Easy?" Paradoxically, the answer is "both."

Here's what Lewis writes about this paradox in that chapter:

Christ says, 'Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked - the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will you Myself: my own will shall become yours.'

Both harder and easier than what we are all trying to do. You have noticed, I expect, that Christ Himself sometimes describes the Christian way as very hard, sometimes as very easy. He says, 'Take up your Cross' - in other words, it is like going to be beaten to death in a concentration camp. Next minute he says, 'My yoke is easy and my burden light.' He means both. ...

The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self - all your wishes and precautions - to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are all trying to do instead. For what we are trying to do is to remain what we call 'ourselves', to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time to be 'good'. We are all trying to let mind and heart go their own way - centred on money or pleasure or ambition - and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly. And that is exactly what Christ warned us you could not do. As He said, a thistle cannot produce figs. If I am a field that contains nothing but grass-seed, I cannot produce wheat. Cutting the grass may keep it short: but I shall still produce grass and no wheat. If I want to produce wheat, the change must go deeper than the surface. I must be ploughed up and re-sown.

So what is the point of it all? Here's how Lewis puts it:

... the Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose. It is even doubtful, you know, whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose.

And again: "Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else." And yet again: "God became man to turn creatures into sons: not simply to produce better men of the old kind but to produce a new kind of man." Lewis continues: "It is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better but like turning a horse into a winged creature. Of course, once it has got its wings, it will soar over fences which could never have been jumped and thus beat the natural horse at its own game."

Much of the fourth book of *Mere Christianity* resonates with the Eastern Orthodox idea of *theosis* or deification, "the process by which a Christian becomes more like God" (*The Orthodox Study Bible*). It is a process that is both hard and easy. It's hard because we have to *strive* to enter through the narrow door. We have to work and not be lazy. We have to submit completely to Christ by dying daily to our "natural" selves and its inclinations (which can sometimes feel so much a part of who we really are that we couldn't imagine a life worth living without them).

As difficult and painful as all of that can be, Lewis insists that it's easier than "trying to remain what we call 'ourselves'" - the kind of persons enslaved to our inclinations and desires - while simultaneously trying to live morally virtuous, holy lives. It just doesn't work. Surrendering to Christ, letting go and letting God, is easier than going it on our own. And, according to Lewis, in this total surrender we find our true and lasting happiness. He writes:

He said (in the Bible) that we were 'gods' and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him - for we can prevent Him, if we choose - He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness.

"The process," Lewis acknowledges, "will be long and in parts very painful." But the end of that process is what it means to become little Christs.

Thomas Merton said that we surrender to God last, those things we like about ourselves most.