There is an old joke I often tell at the beginning of a parish mission. I have probably told it here since through the years, I have conducted three parish missions at St. Mary’s. I will give a $25.00 prize to anyone who can remember one thing I said. Since I can’t remember anything I said, I think my money is safe. However, I do remember the joke. I am not sure if any of you are old enough to remember the traditional Redemptorist Mission that would be given in a parish. On the first night the talk was always on Hell. It is said that the Redemptorists spoke so well on Hell you thought that we had been there. But there were no fiercer Redemptorists than the Irish missionaries. The legend is that one missionary would come out from the pulpit, softly say, *everyone from this parish is going to die.* That certainly got the attention of the congregation, except one time a little fellow in the back of the church smiled a little bit at the words of our missionary. This bothered the missionary and he made eye contact with the man and said a bit louder, *everyone from this parish is going to die.* The fellow in the back went from a smile to a broad grin. Now, our missionary is quite upset. He had never had such a reaction to his words. So, from the top of his longs, he voice booms out, *everyone from this parish is going to die.* Our man in the back breaks out into a laugh, and our missionary can’t take it anymore. He says to the fellow, *why are you laughing*. The man smiles and says *I am not from this parish.*

In today’s Gospel, a man ask Jesus, *Lord Will only a few people be saved?* Jesus tells him *the gate if narrow. People will knock and the door and be told that they are not known to the Lord.* The opposite of being saved is to go to Hell. No doubt many of us in a moment of anger may have told some people to go there. Will many be saved is a serious and troubling question for a hot day in August or for anytime.

I read a story by a New York sportswriter that told the story of his going out to dinner with two friends. One of them said, *if you had to name three people in Hell, who would you name.* They each wrote three names on individual pieces of paper. They all had the same three names listed; they were Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Walter O’Malley. Be assured that the third name has nothing to do with the former governor of Maryland. Walter O’Malley is the man who moved the Dodgers from Brooklyn to Los Angeles. We Brooklynites have a long memory.

How many people will be saved? Will I be saved? I recall that a saint was supposed to have said that *she saw souls going into Hell leaves falling in autumn and souls going into heaven like snowflakes*. The Jehovah witnessed believe, based on their reading of *The Book of Revelation,* that only 144,000 people will be saved. Some of the Protestant traditions of the Christian faith believe in predestination. It is teaching that states that from the moment you are conceived, your final place in eternity, be it heaven or hell, is already decided.

Human beings cry out for justice. As little children we quickly learned to say that was not fair when our brother or sister got away with something that we were punished for. The Holocaust, the evil of September 11th, the terrible action of mass shooters who kill scores of innocent people, the alleged dark deeds of Jeffrey Epstein and those who brutalize children cry out for punishment. We can cry out for hell in such cases. There must be justice.

Hell is a dogma of the Catholic Church. Jesus spoke about Hell. Yet, far more than he spoke about eternal damnation, Jesus spoke about the mercy of his Father. On the cross of Calvary he forgave the very men who crucified him. His greatest parable was about a runaway son he squandered the family inheritance and abandoned his family. When he returns home hungry to his Father, the wayward son falls into the embrace of his father who welcome him with a great feast. Mercy, Mercy, Mercy.

I struggle with the idea of God sending someone to hell for all eternity. I certainly accept it as a teaching of our *church*. Still, I have had people sit before me and tell me their sins and say that God will never forgive them and they are without hope. The believe themselves bound for Hell. I say to them if they are a parent*, is there anything your son or daughter could do that would say anger you that you want to see them punished for all eternity.* I have never heard them say yes to that question. We are made in the image of God. How much beyond our minds is the love and mercy of God. Mercy, Mercy, Mercy.

I knew two elderly priests who use to love to tease one another. The one was always telling the other that he should go to confession to him. *Finally, the man said to his friend, Father, if I were in the state of mortal sin, and you were the only priest left in the world, I would have to rely on a perfect act of contrition*.

The Scriptures tell us that fear is the beginning of wisdom. We are called to live just lives by the grace of God. Sin is to be resisted. We love God not out of fear because he first loved. The founder of the Redemptorists, St. Alphonsus Liguori, said that *conversion brought about by fear will never last; only those brought about love will sustain us.* We are his beloved children. Jesus told us about his father, *God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him may not die but have eternal life.*