

Archbishop Smith: Cancel the Cruise Control!

I must say, I like it. Traveling along the open highway, setting the car on 'cruise' and then letting the vehicle carry me along as I listen to music and enjoy the scenery. Wonderful. Of course, this is something that can be done only when the road conditions allow for it. When I am surrounded by the distraction of heavy traffic, driving in inclement weather or on a twisty gravel road, the use of cruise control would be dangerous. In such conditions, the driver needs to be fully attentive and in complete control, ready to adjust to whatever the conditions of the road demand.

A question was once put to Jesus. We heard about it in the Gospel narrative of Sunday (cf. Luke 13: 22-30). The query dealt with salvation – entrance after death into the blessedness of eternal life. Rather important question, that! It does not, in fact, get more serious than this. The question was posed in this way: "Lord, will only a few be saved?" The answer the Lord gives is direct and blunt, thus underscoring in dramatic fashion just how serious a point this is. "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able." One way to paraphrase this would be: "Cruise control will not get you to heaven. Cancel it now!"

Let's consider carefully the phrasing Jesus is using here. He speaks of the door that leads to heaven as narrow. Well, that one and only door is Jesus himself. He is the gateway through which we must pass if we are to enter eternal life (cf. John 10:9). The narrowness of this door underlines the necessity of repentance aimed at a life in complete conformity with the teachings of Christ. This is why the image of the narrow door is accompanied by the command: "Strive!" The original Greek language here suggests contest, or struggle. In other words, the command of Christ is to make serious effort to follow him attentively in complete fidelity throughout our lives. No place for cruise control here!

Yet, in many ways, placing our lives 'on cruise' is exactly what we do. If I somehow think that the fact of being Baptised will carry me to heaven, even though I make no effort to participate in Sunday Mass, rarely – if ever – go to confession, and give no thought to the poor; if I ignore the Commandments and the teaching of the Beatitudes and make myself my own moral compass, crafting my own morality to match my desires; if I somehow think I can live life on my own terms, just so long as I am nice to people; if I think that these and similar approaches to life will carry me to heaven, then I am presuming that the door is not narrow but wide, and that the "cruise control" of self-will is all that is necessary to arrive and pass through.

This is a dangerous illusion. We know from experience that the road of life is

normally marked by the sharp turns of sudden misfortune, the steep climbs of adversity, the treacherous mountain passes of temptation, the dead ends of failure and the rough and jarring stretches of suffering. The cruise control of lazy complacency is perilously inappropriate for such a path. What is necessary is constant and careful readiness to adapt to conditions by that 'striving,' under grace, that we call faith, trust, repentance and obedience.

Road conditions can change so quickly that there is insufficient time to turn off the cruise and avoid danger. I am grateful for the Lord's warning, given to us in love. Let's heed what he says, strive as he commands, and cancel the cruise control now.