

August 23, 2020

St. Augustine Cathedral

11:30 a.m.

**21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (last Sunday in Cathedral until end of November)**

Several weeks ago in our Gospel Readings, we heard Jesus using beautiful images and powerful Parables as He was teaching His Apostles and closest Disciples, about the Mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven. These Gospel passages helped us to get to know the brilliant Mind of Jesus, the Master Teacher.

Two Sundays ago, the Gospel passage was about the multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes. And last Sunday, we heard about the turbulent storm that the Apostles were in the midst of on the Sea of Galilee, and how Jesus came walking upon those waters to calm the angry Sea, and to relieve the Apostles' fearful hearts. On these last two Sundays, we got an insight into Jesus the Miracle Worker.

But today, we get to see the inner Person of Jesus. St. Matthew tells us that they were walking along the road in Caesarea Philippi. I picture this scene to be one of those moments when Jesus has become a bit more introspective; perhaps He was reflecting on all that had been taking place through His teaching and preaching, and no doubt, wondering (as we all do) if the people, and more to the point, His own Apostles, were "getting it"; was He succeeding in His mission; did the people understand any more now than before He started there??? That's what I think was going on as they were walking along that road. And so, breaking the silence, Jesus asked His first question to the Apostles: "*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*".

It's very important that we hear that question accurately. That phrase "Son of Man" was a well-known Scriptural reference even in the Old Testament to refer to a Prophet, a Holy Man of God, and also sometimes used as a reference to the Messiah. We know that the Apostles quickly reported what they heard "the people on the street" saying: some say John the Baptist is the Son of Man; others, Elijah; still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.

Then, Jesus changed the question, and asked: "*But who do you say that I am?*" There were two major shifts in that question. First, Jesus wanted to know what they thought, not what other people thought; and secondly, He wanted to know what they thought about Him.

That's why Simon's answer was so incredibly remarkable! He immediately blurted out a two-fold, profound and insightful proclamation of Jesus' Divinity. He first of all says: *"You are the Christ!"*

We commonly refer to Jesus as Jesus Christ, almost like that's His full name, like my full name is Paul J. Bradley. But, as I'm sure we realize, that should technically be "Jesus, the Christ"; Jesus is His Name; and "the Christ" is Who He is--"the Anointed One", or "the Messiah" for Whom the Chosen People had been waiting for thousands of years. That was Peter's first insight. But Peter went on: *"You are the Son of the living God!"* Not just "Son of Man", like some of the holy prophets of Old, or even like John the Baptist. No, you are the *"Son of the living God"*! There could be no clearer expression of Who Jesus truly is than that profound profession of Faith.

Something tells me that Peter had no idea where that came from, or how it was that he blurted it out. Even Jesus was taken aback, which explains why His response was: *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Heavenly Father."* Jesus knew that His Father was, in effect, "designating" Peter. And so Jesus was confident in saying: *"And so I say to you: you are Peter (which comes from the word "petra", meaning rock), and upon this Rock, I will build My Church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it."*

It's interesting that Jesus changes Simon's name to Peter, which means "Rock"; Peter was anything but "a Rock" at this point in his life. Jesus knew his flaws; He was aware of his weaknesses; He foreknew that Peter would deny Him in a moment of weakness during Jesus' Passion. But Jesus also knew his potential for greatness. And so Jesus was confident that Peter would be able to carry on Jesus' mission; that he would be the one to protect, defend, and love Jesus' Church. Jesus not only saw Peter's potential as a Rock upon which His Church would be built and sustained, but also as the one to whom He could give His total authority. And so He gives Peter the *"keys to the kingdom of Heaven"*.

Keys are a symbol of "authority". Usually the one who has the keys is the one in charge. We heard about "Keys" in today's First Reading too, when Isaiah was speaking on behalf of the Lord to Shebna, the master of the palace, who, because of a misuse of his authority, was being replaced by Eliakim. Eliakim would now be given the sash of authority, and the "Key of the House of David", which would empower him to *"open what no one else could shut, and shut what no one else*

*could open*". In an even greater way, Jesus gave Peter the "Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven" which empowered him to: *"whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."*

Today's Readings don't attempt to draw us into a deeper understanding of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like through a well-crafted Parable by Jesus the Master Teacher; we're not being impressed by a miraculous event, such as the Transfiguration, the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes, or Walking on the Stormy Sea by Jesus the Wonder Worker. No, we're being asked to reflect on the very basic question of "personal identity". And in addition to that, as People of Faith, we're also being asked one of the most important questions we'll ever need to answer: Who do you say, and who do I say, that Jesus is? And what difference does knowing Who Jesus is make in my life---in my daily decisions, in the choices I make, in the values I have, in the company I keep, and in the priorities I hold most dear to me.

We have a clear advantage over Peter; we already know the right answer; we know that Jesus is the Victor over sin and death; that His Resurrection has destroyed the power of sin and death, and that through our Faith in Jesus, we share in His Victory. The question is: do I really believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God? And do I believe it enough for that answer to make a substantive difference in every aspect of my life? To have the kind of conversation that Jesus had with His Apostles was quite a risk, but it also took His relationship with them to a far deeper level.

That's true in our own lives, both in our relationship with Jesus, but also in the important relationships we enjoy with others. We can have lots of good friends, perhaps a couple of people we'd consider our very best friends; we can even enjoy the intimacy of a relationship with a spouse. However, if all we talk about are current events, what's new on Facebook, the latest political scandals, or what's trending on Instagram, our relationships might remain safe, but they won't be strong.

Jesus took quite a risk in asking His Apostles that question. Jesus wants to take that risk with us as well. He asks us that same, very important question: Who do you say....Who do I say... that Jesus is?

It's not good enough for us to know about Jesus; we need to come to know Who Jesus is. We need to know, and believe, and put all our faith and trust in the fact that, Jesus is "*the Christ*"; Jesus is "*the Son of the Living God*".

St. Paul literally sang the praises of God in today's Second Reading in his Letter to the Romans when he wrote: "*Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God; how inscrutable are His judgments, and how unsearchable His ways. For who has known the mind of the Lord?*" Who can know the mind of the Lord? Only those whom the Lord allows to get to know Him. That's what Jesus wants us to do; to get to know Him. And when we know Him, then we can love Him. And when we Love Him, then we will naturally, willingly, and joyfully serve Him in all that we say and do, all the days of our lives.

So naturally, our question might be "how do I do that?" Well, how do you get to know anyone at a level deeper than surface knowledge? We need to spend time; we need to interact; we need to share values. Many of the Saints agree that there are three effective ways to "know, love and serve" Jesus.

The first is spending time in prayer and reflecting on God's Word. Engaging in prayerful conversation with Jesus not only draws us closer to Him, but allows Jesus to get to know us better too.

The second way is by interacting with Jesus and the rest of our Family of Faith when we come together---actually or virtually---to celebrate Jesus' Presence with us in the Holy Eucharist, and in the graces of the other Sacraments. Here in the Mass, Jesus has given us the perfect way to be united with Him, and, in the process, we not only get to know Him, but we can be in intimate communion with Him.

Finally, we get to know Jesus better by sharing the same Values that Jesus had. Jesus told us that the ultimate reason why He came into the world was to "*serve, not to be served*"; and Jesus also taught us that the greatest in the Kingdom is the "*one who serves the needs of others*". And so, we come to know and see Jesus especially in the faces of the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalized of our world---not just the entire world, but in our world---our spheres of influence---in the places and among the people where we spend our lives. We get to know Jesus better through participating in the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy. We come to know and love Jesus, by serving the "least among us".

Rocks provide solid foundations upon which we can build a sense of security, and which allow us to mature and grow into our potential, as Peter eventually would do; keys give us a share in the authority of Christ, but we can also use “keys” to unlock our hearts so that we can let Jesus in and allow Him to truly love us for the person we are, as we try to keep growing in holiness. Through prayer, celebrating the Holy Eucharist, and serving others, we come to know, love and serve Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Let us pray that our knowledge and love of Jesus can be the Rock on which we build our lives; let us pray that we will use the Keys to our hearts to open ourselves completely to the mind and Heart of Jesus, Who wants to be One with us. That is how we come to know Jesus, and once we do, along with St. Paul, our whole lives will proclaim: *“For from Him, and through Him, and for Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen.”*