

Jesus is the Christ-- Why Not Spread the Good News?

Homily on Matthew 16: 13- 20

There was a deacon who really loved to play golf, but he'd had a really busy summer and barely played at all. One weekend when the weather was beautiful for golf he was scheduled to assist at all the Sunday Masses, and on Saturday evening he gave in to temptation and called the priest who was saying Mass on Sunday and said: "Father, I'm so sorry but I've just come down with a terrible case of the flu. I won't be able to be at the Masses tomorrow."

The priest wished him a speedy recovery, and the next morning the Deacon got up early, quietly got out of the house with his golf clubs in the trunk of his car, and drove to a course 20 or 30 miles away where he figured no one would know him. He paid his greens fees, and, since it was still early, he was the only one on the first tee, so he played alone.

He got to the fourth hole-- a par 4, 350 yard hole-- and hit the shot of his life. He hit a huge long drive, and the ball hit a rock or sprinkler head and took a big bounce and rolled and rolled, right on to the green and into the hole. The Deacon couldn't believe it and started shouting for joy.

St. Peter and God were up in heaven watching, and St. Peter turned to God and said: "God, how did you let him do that? He was supposed to be at Mass and he lied and snuck out to play golf, and then hit the shot of his life. Why?" God turned and said: "Peter, you're right. It was the shot of his life, a fabulous shot. But think about this-- who's he going to be able to tell about it?"

This issue of telling others about something wonderful is raised in today's Gospel as well, when Jesus issues this surprising command that his disciples tell no one that He is the Christ. And as we reflect on what is going on here-- why Jesus tells them to tell no one who He is-- we might reflect as well on what these events might suggest to us in the context of some of our current struggles with our past as a country and the symbols of that past.

So why does Jesus tell Peter not to tell anyone who He is? Wouldn't you expect just the opposite-- that He would want the disciples to tell the world that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior? Perhaps we see the reason for Jesus' command as we read on in Matthew's Gospel, where in the very next lines Matthew tells us that Jesus starts to teach His disciples that He will have to go to the Jerusalem and be crucified and die, and Peter's response is immediate and dramatic. Peter tells Jesus that Jesus has it wrong, that the Messiah doesn't have to do that, and Jesus says: "Get behind me Satan."

Peter obviously knows that Jesus is the Christ, but he has no idea what that means. He is thinking what everyone at the time thought-- that the Christ, the Messiah, would come to restore the earthly kingdom of Israel, and rule as a wonderful, powerful, rich ruler who would throw out the Romans. Even as Jesus is being arrested Peter still doesn't get it-- doesn't appreciate that being the Christ means going to the cross-- and takes out his sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant. Peter is thinking earthly force and power. Jesus is thinking of the cross-- of giving Himself for all of us.

Hard to blame Peter, or the other disciples who thought the same thing. They were captives of a way of thinking, of a view of the world they and everyone they knew had, and it

took a lot of time, and prayer and reflection, for them to begin to understand what was truly going on. In some sense we're still working out that understanding.

And that might be one of the things we take away from this Gospel reading--- how difficult it is for people to truly appreciate events as they are in the middle of them, especially when that understanding requires them to set aside their life-long views. It is very easy for us to look back at events, and see them with clarity. Hindsight is always 20/20 as they say.

But it is very dangerous for us to look back historically and use that as a basis to make judgments about the personal morality of individuals. We're simply not equipped to do that, and that work is God's work, not ours. We might remember how Jesus approached judging those who were His executioners, when He said we should forgive them because they didn't know what they were doing.

Perhaps when we remember how badly Peter and the others misunderstood what they were seeing with their own eyes we might be better-able to avoid rushing to judgment with respect to those in our own country's history who seem not to have made moral judgments that seem so obvious to us now.

But what of the historical symbols, the statues, the other evidence of what people, especially black people, experienced? There too perhaps this Gospel might speak to us, because we reflect today on Jesus as the Christ, a revelation to Peter and yet a mystery, because Jesus only becomes the Christ on and through the cross. In a very real sense the cross is THE symbol of Jesus as Christ, as Messiah.

And yet that has not always been the case. The cross which we see here and on all Christian churches, and which we wear around our necks or on our clothes, was not the early symbol for Christianity. In fact, the cross was so terrible, so reminded people of their oppression and persecution, that it did not become symbolic of Christianity until everyone who had ever seen a crucifixion had died, and one more generation after that had died as well.

It took that much time and distance for the terror and horror to drain out of the symbol so it could be re-purposed, if you will, to become the symbol of Christianity it is today.

Now I don't know what we should do with statues and symbols associated with a dark period of our history, a period of oppression and persecution. That's a political question that needs some real discussion. But I don't think we can honestly say that we're at a point where generations have passed-- where we have put real historical distance-- between the oppression, the bias, the prejudice which people have experienced and the symbols associated with that oppression. So these are tough conversations.

And yet, shining through it all, is one symbol-- our symbol-- the symbol of Jesus as the Christ-- the cross, a symbol of God's love for all humanity, a symbol that must never be associated with any bias or prejudice on the basis of race or heritage or ethnicity or class, a symbol that reminds us that love is stronger than hate, and that the bonds of our common kinship with Jesus are stronger than any superficial earthly differences.

Perhaps as we reflect on that eternal symbol we will come to see more clearly what to do with those earthly symbols which now seem so divisive.