

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Who do people say that I am?

The Church again and again visits Caesarea Philippi and reflects on Jesus' all-important question: Who do people say that I am?

He doesn't ask about His teaching or about the impression He is making. He asks about His very identity because in the end, that is what truly matters.

While His teaching is very important for us, it is WHO He is that is of ultimate importance. And it is Simon alone who grasps the heart of the matter: ***You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*** He sees that Jesus is not a figure about whom we can be neutral or indifferent.

Why? Well, because if He is who He says he is then we must give our whole selves to Him. If He is one teacher among many—then we can put Him on the shelf, we can pay attention to Him or not, and we can pick and choose from His message and even completely reject the parts we don't like.

BUT, if He is indeed God moving among His people, we must give Him our whole lives. While on the other hand, if He is not who He says He is, He is not a good teacher, in fact, he is a very bad man and a deluded fanatic. Especially since He consistently speaks and acts in the very person of God.

Simon recognizes who Jesus truly is. He is able to grasp it. He knows that his Lord requires all or nothing at all. Jesus has made it clear: ***Either you are with Me or you are against Me.***

And so, Simon realizing this, he makes his foundational confession of faith: ***You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*** It is so foundational that Jesus changes his name to ***Rock***—Peter. And then, the Lord promises to build his church upon this rock. The word in Greek here for church is very instructive. It is ***ekklesia***. ***Ek*** means ***out from*** and ***kaleo*** means ***to call, to summon***.

Ekklesia is that community of people who have been called out; who have been summoned out from one reality into quite another. To be a member of Christ's community is to have left something very consciously and to have moved into something new very consciously.

To be with Christ is know what you have left behind. We see this most vividly in the symbolism of Baptism as practiced in the early church. When someone came to the cathedral or church to be baptized, they were told to strip off their street clothes. It was a symbol of leaving behind their old way of life. Then naked, they were oiled up with the Sacred Chrism and then lead down into the pool to be baptized. Then upon leaving the pool they were clothed in a white garment symbolizing their new life in Christ and the new world they were entering as members of the Christian community.

If being a member of the church doesn't set you into opposition to anything then you haven't really become a member of the church.

This is so because the church stands against the powers of darkness. If we are going to stand resolutely for something, this implies we must also stand resolutely against something. We are called out of the world—not the world of God's good creation—but the world that is predicated on selfishness, materialism, individualism, violence and self-love; what St. Augustine called the **earthy city**. That is what the church is against.

We are not meant to be **get-along people**; those who go along to get-along. We are able to recognize that not every aspect of the culture is good. There are some good aspects indeed. Yet, the culture is very much influenced by the world and it is marked by this worldliness.

The church is called out of it and is meant to stand against it.

And so now, what are we called into? We are called into a new community; into a new way of thinking; into a new mode of acting. We are called into what St. Augustine termed the **heavenly city** or the **City of God**. And what is this? It is a place where love, peace, non-violence, compassion, forgiveness and the corporal and spiritual works of mercy hold sway.

This is the church, the life of the church to which we belong.

Some of the earliest observers of the life of the Christian community were struck by how different Christians were. **Look at these Christians see how they love one another**. The ancient world could see the quality of our love and marveled at it.

My brothers and sisters, we should stand out. We should look different. People should notice that we think and move and organize ourselves distinctively.

Modern society tends to privatize religion and that poses problems. A privatized religion is just not what Jesus is about; because if we don't show up in the society, if we have no public profile, we haven't been **called out** of anything. If people look around and they cannot notice Catholic Christians, they can't notice church people, and we merely blend in like everybody else, then we are indeed missing our calling.

We must remember that we are a fighting church. This is derived from something else Jesus says to Peter in today's Gospel: **...and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it**. That is to say, not prevail against the church.

This does not refer to the powers of the netherworld being able to break down the walls of the church—but rather—that the gates of hell, the gates of the dysfunctional world, will never prevail against the invading church. We are meant to be on the march, albeit nonviolently and with love and compassion--but militantly, using the weapons of Holy Spirit.

We should never be satisfied to live in a Catholic Christian ghetto. Our purpose is to announce the Gospel to all nations; to transform the world by the way we live and love and forgive and through our corporal and spiritual works of mercy; and in so doing to call everybody out of the earthly city and bring them into the community of the City of God.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella