

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: AUGUST 23, 2020

'Peter of Galilee for Pope!' "We want Peter the Rock!" Do you think Peter could be elected Pope today? What led Jesus to designate Peter for such a responsibility of leadership? We know Jesus was fonder of the "beloved disciple" who could have been Saint John. But, from this point on in the gospel, Peter is featured more and more in the Jesus story. That includes his weakness, his betrayal, his shame, and his three-fold call to love Jesus and tend to the flock of the disciples.

This passage from the sixteenth chapter of the gospel of Matthew is a pivotal happening not only for Peter but for the entire story of Jesus' public ministry. It is the similar pivotal story in the gospels of Mark and Luke. The base of Jesus vision has been shared; he has called followers to embrace a new human story which he called the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. Now he faces Jerusalem and the call to show in action what this kingdom is really about.

Jesus is at Caesarea Philippi, the northern most part of Israel which today is below the Golan Heights. He puts his disciples on the spot. "Whom do people say that I am?" They try to show how smart they are and bring up names of various prophets. They are probably very proud of themselves. Then Jesus turns this back on themselves, "But whom do you say that I am?" Can you feel what it meant to be put on the spot with this question? What would I say, even today after being raised as a Christian? Would I give the stock answers that Jesus is the Son of God, or the second person of the Trinity? And what would that mean to me? What am I really saying? Peter's response is quite astonishing, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." "The Son of the Living God!" Would I think of describing Jesus this way?

I believe we in the year 2020 are at a pivotal stage of the history of the body of Christ, the Church. The viral pandemic has changed everything. What will the church be like when and if we return to more normal times? Will the church be the same?

There are so many questions now. Will people return to the church and expect things to go on as they once did? In their homes have some Catholics developed their own liturgy and practices to express their following of Christ? Have people become more self-conscious of themselves as being Christ's body and his followers? Have some gotten tired of the institutional church with its male hierarchy, clerical authoritarianism, its lack of appreciation of human experience? Do some dismiss the church because our American culture has taught us to be rugged individuals while the church promotes the common good?

Today's scriptures point the way to a gospel way of seeing things.

First of all, each one of us has to answer the question, "But whom do you say that I am?" There is no Christianity without Jesus. Being his follower means we learn to walk with Jesus, talk with Jesus, argue with Jesus, review our life in the light of Jesus' teachings. We will finally come to know ourselves and what it means to be a human being when we can say with Saint Paul, "It is not I who live but Christ who lives in me."

The second thing the gospel today teaches us is that we need to belong to a religious tradition in order to live that way of life that goes beyond my own little existence, my own opinions and feelings. In our own Catholic tradition Jesus says to Peter, "You are rock and on this rock I will build my church." This tradition is much more than an institutional church with bishops and priests leading us. It is a way of life, a way of seeing reality.

Yes, there is Peter, the Pope, the symbol of our unity as a world-wide people. We are not an American Catholic Church dragging our racism, sexism and consumerism and our limited vision into our lives. We are certainly not just a Glastonbury Catholic Church. We are a Christ-centered, universal church.

The Catholic tradition sees the presence of God among all people and in all things. It is a sacramental view of reality where the sacred and profane are one and all the cosmos is drenched in the divine. The Catholic imagination is best expressed in ritual, music, art and play. It respects science and knowledge and is never anti-intellectual. It embraces scripture but in a playful way and never in a fundamentalist, literal reading. It calls us to be a community and be concerned with the common good, even at times going beyond our individual rights. It is a tradition of social justice that emphasizes peace, nuclear disarmament, care of the poor, health care, reverence for all life at every level.

The re-birth of the church following our present social upheaval demands that each one of us is committed to these two directions – Christ and the community. Let us embrace this challenge with hope and with optimism. The Holy Spirit still breathes in us.

Saint Paul wrote to the Romans, and to all of us, these inspiring words: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been God's counselor? Or who has given God a gift to receive a gift in return? For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be the glory forever Amen."

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