

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

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Brothers and Sisters,

In today's Gospel, Jesus asks his disciples to make them aware of whom they were following at the cost of leaving their work and even their families. He first asked them, "Who do people say that I am?" They answered, "John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others one of the prophets." Then Jesus asks the most important question: "But who do you say that I am?" And we all know the answer Peter gave: "You are the Messiah."

Looking back over 65 years of my life, thank God, I have read this passage several times a year, and I have read explanations of biblical scholars on this passage, and I myself made many comments on this question of Jesus, both in homilies and in Bible studies that I have had the opportunity to give. Every time I read this passage, again and again, I answer this question. Somehow, I have never tired of answering it. It is almost like my confession of faith that I must make permanently.

That is why I come back again today to share with you my meditation on this passage.

I ask each one of you to respond to Jesus as your permanent confession of faith and to renew the faith to follow Jesus today as we continue to live in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic and the events that are happening on our planet earth: great floods, wars, displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, etc.

Gospel (Mark 8:27-35): Which Jesus do we follow? Peter's confession

Surely you have often heard the account of the event at Caesarea Philippi known as "Peter's confession" and "the first announcement of the passion" on the part of Jesus. Today we read the version according to Mark (8:27-35), but this event also appears in the Gospels of Matthew (16:13-25) and Luke (9:18-24). This means that it had a great impact on the first Christians: When they met to pray, they must have frequently reread this passage of the Gospel. I would say that it is a foundational experience of faith as Christians of all times: If I do not answer this question Jesus asks me, I cannot be his disciple.

The group of disciples closest to Jesus had already spent a lot of time following Jesus as their teacher. They have already engraved in their memory the teachings of the parables but especially the miracles of healings and deliverance from demons that Jesus was performing in front of their eyes. The moments when Jesus multiplied the loaves for five thousand men and walked on the waters and calmed the storm in the middle of the Lake of Galilee must have been very much engraved in their memory.

As the disciples followed the journey of their teacher Jesus, eating, drinking, conversing, and praying together, they had ample opportunity to know who he was and what he was about. Undoubtedly he was a wonderful teacher. He was no ordinary man, and the disciples knew it when they saw how he attracted people and changed their lives.

Jesus, already knowing them well enough, while on his way to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, asks them a very important question: "And who do you say that I am?" Peter answers: "You are the Messiah." With this answer, it became clear that Jesus is the Messiah sent by God.

But when Jesus goes further and tells the disciples about his Passion, Peter doesn't understand it at all and opposes vehemently. He took Jesus aside to warn him. Peter, who was the first to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, was also the first to reject him. (When Jesus was arrested, Peter was afraid to admit that Jesus was his friend and said he did not know him.) Peter told Jesus that he would not let him go that way, that the way was meaningless, and that he must not let that happen.

Jesus immediately rebuked Peter because his actions signified the voice of Satan. He was trying to stop him from fulfilling the hope of his divine father. So Jesus sternly told Peter, "Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do." He rebuked Pete, practically saying, "Peter, go back to the other disciples. And do not tempt me."

In the end Jesus summoned his disciples and the crowd and told them to listen carefully to his words: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Then he expounded it so that they would not forget: "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it," (Mark 8:35-37)

It is easy to declare who Jesus is in words, but they had not yet imagined that following him and sharing his plan would involve persecution and the cross.

The First Reading (Isaiah 50:5-9a): Jesus is the Suffering Servant foretold by the prophet Isaiah

Mark points out that Jesus must suffer much. He is the suffering servant announced by the prophet Isaiah. Jesus spoke to his disciples clearly from the beginning, without hiding anything from them. They had to know that suffering would always accompany them in their task of announcing and opening the way for the coming of the kingdom of God in the world. Jesus' final destiny came sooner than they had expected in a dramatic way. He was condemned, rejected and executed violently by the Jewish religious leaders for having confessed that he himself is the Son of God, the Messiah announced by the prophets. Only when he was resurrected on the third day, they understood what Jesus himself had announced to them, but they needed the fire of the Holy Spirit to come out of their hiding places and go into the world to announce who Jesus is and his gospel, even to the point of giving their lives like Jesus for the cause of the kingdom of God.

The Second Reading (James 2:14-18): Let us put into practice the teachings and examples of Jesus

We know that no one is obliged to follow Jesus, to be his disciple, because it is a free decision of each one. But if we say Yes to Jesus, and we must confess to others who Jesus is and strive to put into practice his commandment of love and mercy.

We will only be disciples of Jesus if we are true collaborators of his mission, so that this world may be more human, so that all may live as children of God. We are called to be builders of unity rather than dividers, having a heart open to all. More concretely, our mission is putting into practice the works of mercy, as we are told in the parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25.

As in the time of Jesus and throughout history, even more so today, it is not easy to be a Christian, an authentic follower of Jesus. But it is worth it. Living as a Christian is filled with meaning because Jesus is the only savior of our life.

Let us conclude by asking the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph to sustain us and accompany us on the path of following Jesus. Amen.

Note: All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE).