

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 15 Sept 2024 + Isa 50 + Jas 2 + Mk 8:27-35

These days there is a common idea out there that goes something like, “*well, it doesn't really matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere.*” That sounds nice, but is it true? In other words, is that what Jesus would say about this idea? Now obviously, sincerity is important. But is it enough for someone just to have a sincere belief and not worry about the *content* of that faith? Let's see what our Gospel today has to say about that question.

To begin, Jesus asks His disciples a question: *Who do people say that I am?* Now, He's not doing this because He is afraid that His favorability numbers have gone down in recent polls. Rather, He is leading His disciples along, to see if they have come to understand all He has shown and taught them so far. The disciples' reply is that most of the people believe that He is in the line of the great prophets of the Old Covenant. And that is true, but it is far from complete. And so Jesus turns the question to the disciples, to see if they recognize the inadequacy of the people's understanding of Jesus' identity.

So Peter, speaking on behalf of the 12, says: *You are the Christ.* The word 'Christ' means 'anointed one,' and has a long and complex history of meaning in the Old Testament. Some thought that the Christ would be a warrior king who would fight off Israel's enemies, such as the dreaded Romans. Others thought the Christ would be a cultic figure, a priest in the line of Aaron. Still others thought of the Christ as a kind of superhero who would usher in a new age of peace and prosperity. So Peter is on the right track in recognizing that Jesus is more than just a prophet, but his idea of the “Christ” is still incomplete, as we quickly see.

When Jesus attempts to explain what it *really* means for Himself to be the “Christ”; that is, to *suffer greatly and be rejected...and be killed, and rise after three days*, that just doesn't fit with Peter's ideal for whom *he* thinks that the 'Christ' should be. But what is fascinating here is that when Peter voices his disapproval of Jesus' explanation, Jesus doesn't just say “oh Peter, there you go again” and give him a friendly slap on the back. No, we hear that Jesus *rebuked* him. There is a stern connotation in the Greek here, which is amplified by the fact that Jesus goes so far as to even call Peter 'satan', meaning, 'the adversary.'

So what is the big deal here? Well, there are two big problems. First of all, Peter had “stepped in front of Jesus,” so to speak. The disciple got ahead of the teacher, and attempted to tell Jesus what He should do, which is why Jesus says *get behind me!* And second, Peter was simply wrong about God's will for Who His Christ would be; Peter was *thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.* In doing so, Peter was actually working against God, he was acting as His adversary. This is serious business. So after rebuking Peter, Jesus then tells not just the 12 but the whole crowd how true belief must lead to true action. That *whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.* The disciple must always follow, not walk before the Lord.

So what are we to learn from this powerful episode? Well, I think there are at least 3 considerations we are left with today. First, what if the Lord were to ask us today, *Who do people say that I am?* I think our unfortunate response would have to be something like: a historical figure, a spiritual guru, a projection of man's quest for meaning, a crazy guy who deluded a lot of people. Or perhaps respond that frankly many people today just don't care about who Jesus is. Now, they may be sincere in their beliefs, but the reality is, like the crowds in our Gospel today, the people are wrong. Sincerity of belief alone is not enough.

So what if He then said to each of us, personally, *who do you say that I am?* If we consider ourselves to be Christians, to be Catholics, then I think all of us would say correctly, *You are the Christ.* But the next question is, 'ok, fine, He is the Christ, but what does that mean?' Like Peter, do we get to define what that means, and "walk ahead of Him"? Well, no. Even sincerity of belief in Jesus the Christ is still not enough. Meaning, it matters what we believe *about* Jesus.

Because sadly, we all know that perhaps even very sincere believers in Jesus turn Him into their own image and likeness all the time. I hesitate to point fingers here, but we might think of disgraced televangelists that used the Lord's name in order to make themselves criminally wealthy. That is an extreme example, but I think making the mistake of Peter in our Gospel today is actually very easy to do. Basically, it is saying, "I will believe, but on my terms." And usually, those terms are something like this: 'I will believe in Jesus the Christ, but only if I don't have to suffer, only if I can always make sense out of what He is doing, only if it is convenient with my schedule, only if I don't have to wait for answered prayers.'

But those conditions aren't really belief; it is *not thinking as God does, but as human beings do.* True faith in Jesus the Christ, according to His own words, is: *whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.* And those words were no easier 2,000 years ago as they are today. This is what St. James is getting at in our 2nd reading today, that true faith is a *working* faith; that is, it looks like something. True believers look like the crucified Christ, each in their own unique way.

So we can understand St. Peter's revulsion at Jesus' prophecy of His suffering and death here. No one wants to suffer, no one wants to die, no one could understand resurrection until it happened. Neither Peter nor the other disciples really understood this most difficult standard of discipleship until after the Resurrection and Pentecost. When Peter saw that the Cross did not terminate in death, but in the resurrection and eternal life, and when the Lord's own eternal Holy Spirit became alive in his heart, everything changed. We have that same eternal Holy Spirit alive in our hearts, enabling us to *truly* believe. If we seek the Lord and His will daily, if we ask Him to help us to get out of His way and so follow Him, if we seek to live our faith not just in word but in deed too, we can know that He will lead us through the way of the Cross in this life and all the way to heaven, safely home.