



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

The Twenty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time

August 27, 2017

St. Mary of the Assumption Parish

ISAIAH 22: 19-33

We come in at the middle of the story in this selection from Isaiah. It begins with the prophet's vehement critique of Shebna, an arrogant, prophet-contradicting master of the palace who encouraged the king to get involved in a hopeless battle against Assyria. Most symbolically, Shebna constructed an elaborate, highly placed tomb for himself — perhaps an unwitting indication of the hollowness of his ambitions. Our reading begins with the oracle predicting Shebna's fall and God's intent to place another, one far more faithful, in his role.

This selection from Isaiah connects with today's Gospel through the symbols of the keys and the authority to open and close or bind and loose. But, in reality Hilkiyah receives much more power and honor than Jesus gives to Peter. Hilkiyah is dressed in fine clothing, is called the father of the people and is described like a strong, anchoring tent peg for his people. Peter isn't going to fulfill those roles by a long shot. Nevertheless, Isaiah's message is that God provides leadership for the people.

This story also reminds us of a theme that runs through both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures. Even as most of the leaders we read about in the Bible furthered God's plan, they all had their own well-known flaws. There is something consoling in the way Scripture depicts the people God chooses to be authorities as fallible humans who have as much need of conversion as do the rest of us. As long as they remember that, they are good guides. When they forget it, God's warning is clear: "I ... will pull you down."

ROMANS 11:33-36

For the past couple of weeks we have witnessed Paul's process of working through the theological problem he pondered and the emotional distress he suffered from his own people's inability or refusal to believe in Jesus. We heard him express his deep conviction that God's choice of Israel was irrevocable and at the same time, his anguish at their inexplicable inability to accept what God had accomplished in Christ. We saw his sorrowful confusion as he, like so many other religious people, struggled to accept the fact that he had done everything he could to share his faith, and that the only thing left to do on behalf of his beloved unbelievers was to trust in God.

Paul eventually emerged from that process with a hymn of praise. It wasn't that he had any answers to his questions, but he had encountered God's mercy at the heart of them. This is one of those instances in which we see how God's grace continually works at a level slightly deeper and stronger than the pain and desire of the faithful who pray for answers. Although it may not have been his intention, Paul's willingness to expose his sorrow and frustration provides a witness for all who are willing to be praying evangelizers.

The first line of Paul's prayer of praise aptly reflects the Book of Job. Job had cried out to God about his innocent suffering and Paul lamented his people's lack of faith. Out of deep pain, one personal, the other communal, they both turned to God with an inconsolable, "Why!" Both of them were reminded of what Psalm 139 proclaims: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, far too lofty for me to reach." As if in response to that affirmation, Paul quotes and admits the truth conveyed by Isaiah 40:13: "Who has known the mind of the Lord?"

The next line, "who has given the Lord anything that he may be repaid?" depicts the kind of humility necessary for anyone who wishes to get involved in a serious relationship with God.

Paul had dedicated his life to evangelization with unparalleled apostolic fervor. It took immense conviction and tenacity to do that. At the same time, he had to maintain the profound humility of admitting that God's ways are inscrutable, that God owed him no explanations. Maintaining that balance was a task that would lead either to schizophrenia or sanctity.

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What can Paul teach us about the road to sanctity? How did he persevere as an evangelizer when he had such intense, wrenching questions? It would seem that, audaciously outspoken as he was, Paul maintained the Jewish virtue of fear of the Lord. That is what he expressed in his praise of God's inscrutability. On the day that we demand answers from God, we have constituted ourselves as the standard for truth and have initiated the idolatrous process of creating a god in our own image. That was what Job learned in his pathos. Genuine fear of the Lord provided the melody line of Paul's hymn; his praise was a simple song of awe and joy in the face of the unfathomable depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. What sustained that hymn was trust in God's love, the conviction that God's goodness and mercy surpass every other dimension of God's greatness. Meditation on Paul's hymn might be an apt preparation for listening to today's Gospel with new ears.

MT 16: 13-20

Matthew picks up this account from Mark and embellishes it, whereas Luke, actually condenses the original. Although Luke drops the detail that it all happened in Caesarea Philippi, that seemed important to Matthew and Mark. They probably emphasized the location because it was known as the area of a temple to the shepherd-god Pan, and its name connected it with imperial power. Caesarea Philippi had a long history of development and had been named for successive emperors and kings. Even before there is any conversation, the setting itself hints at questions of rulers and kingdoms. There seems to be no other reason for mentioning the geography.

As the scene opens, Jesus takes the initiative and asks a loaded question: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Instead of simply saying "What do people think of me?" he used the cryptic designation "Son of Man." That was the only title he tended to use for himself and he used it with three distinct shades of meaning: as a reference to himself, as the present Son of Man who ate and drank with others and could assume the authority to act as Lord of the Sabbath; as his self-designation as the one who would be betrayed and handed over; and as an apocalyptic reference to the Son of man known from the Hebrew Scriptures who would be revealed in glory. The term thus describes Jesus' self-concept as the man who shared life with others, who would suffer immensely, and to whom God promised a glorious future. In a sense, asking the question by using "Son of Man" vocabulary gave the disciples a mysterious hint about what he thought of himself even as he asked to hear other perspectives.

It sounds as if all the disciples who were present got in on round one of the answer session. "Some say John the Baptist." That had already been published as Herod's frightened or superstitious explanation of Jesus' mighty works and popularity (Matthew 14:2). Following that reference, the disciples went a bit further afield and mentioned that some people identified Jesus with their favorite prophets from of old. Surprisingly, they all seem to just take it in stride and make no comment about the fact that each attempt to describe Jesus identified him with someone who had already died. Could they not imagine that God might send a fresh prophet into their moment of history?

Having heard what the religious rumor mill was turning out, Jesus turned the spotlight on his friends. Peter took the role of spokesman and proclaimed, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

What we can assume is that even if Peter might not have had the most orthodox theological or dogmatic propositions in mind, his words connoted a commitment. Speaking for the group, he declared that they believed God was speaking through Jesus in quite an extraordinary way. In fact, they were betting their lives on it. For them, Jesus was the Christ, God's anointed, the one who was speaking God's will and word in that moment.

To the title "Christ," Peter added "the Son of the living God." That reiterated what the disciples had said on the boat after Jesus came to them and calmed the storm. Then, they said it gratefully in relation to his mastery of the forces of nature. Now, in a moment of tranquility when they were invited to make a deeper assessment of what they believed, they assented to Peter's proclamation.

Just as Peter spoke for the group, Jesus' reply to him was directed to them all. Jesus pointed out that what they believed about him was not the result of their intelligence or any incontrovertible evidence; it was the fruit of grace. That grace was what made Jesus confident that Peter and the group could be the living stones from which to construct a community that would become his church.

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Talk about being put on the spot! How rare and potentially embarrassing is it to have a friend look you in the eye and ask, “What do you think of me?” How are we supposed to approach that question? We might hide behind the details that belong in a résumé, mentioning professional, social or athletic accomplishments. Getting a little more personal, we could refer to the person’s qualities and remain on the superficial level of adjectives like “nice, good-looking, strong,” or venture into more relational descriptions such as “my friend, my beloved, my hero.” That’s pretty much the disciples’ challenge in today’s Gospel.

Jesus led his friends away from their normal stomping grounds and then started to ask questions that, ultimately, led them to explain who they themselves were as they continued to follow his lead.

When Jesus asked, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” he started innocently enough by getting them to report on what they were hearing about him. In the days before Twitter or NPR, their grapevine relied on what they picked up at synagogue patios and city gates, plus a little of what the women heard around the town well. Without naming their blowhard source, their first answer cited Herod’s phobic notion that Jesus might be the Baptist back from the dead. Then, they added popular opinions that identified him with Elijah or another of the prophets. What kind of look did Jesus give the disciples as they recited the names of the long-deceased people he was rumored to impersonate?

Then, yanking them right out of the role of impartial reporting, Jesus put them on the witness stand by asking one direct question: “But who do you say that I am?” One can imagine that the ground beneath their feet suddenly seemed fascinating as they pondered how to respond. Peter eventually spoke up. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

That was a great answer and so open-ended that he could hardly have been wrong.

The title “Christ” simply means “anointed.” It could refer to a Hebrew king, a priest, a prophet or even a foreigner like Cyrus the Persian. It clearly conveyed the idea that Jesus was God’s agent, but whether or not he was a savior or what kind of a savior he might be, was anything but obvious.

Theological precision aside, Peter’s statement in the name of the group, effectively declared that their relationship with Jesus was the commitment that defined their lives. When Jesus responded “flesh and blood has not revealed this to you,” he acknowledged that he saw God’s grace at work in

Peter. Building on the Father’s affirmation of him at his baptism, this interaction assured Jesus not only that he was God’s beloved, but that his mission would find a home and a future among his disciples. While their faith was not yet resilient enough to withstand the storms to come and still needed much clarification, it was enough to build on. In fact, Jesus proclaimed that it was strong enough that the netherworld could not overcome it.

By calling Jesus the Son of God, Peter had desacralized the Roman Empire’s claims about the divinity of Caesar and the validity of his rule. When Jesus gave Peter the “power of the keys,” he was delegitimizing the religious elite who claimed the exclusive right to interpret the Mosaic Law. The disciples had seen Jesus “loose” the laws of Sabbath and purity; now he was sharing that responsibility with them. In giving Peter and his church the keys to the kingdom of heaven, Jesus gave them the responsibility to open doors as he had done throughout his ministry. While the official religious authorities were often quick to decide who was in and who was out, Jesus excluded no one but rather mourned the plight of those who excluded themselves by rejecting the gifts he offered.

When we read this story as a dialog about apostolic dedication, we begin to comprehend what it means for the church today. Those of us who make bold to stand with Peter and say, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” are making a commitment and receiving a vocation. We are consecrating ourselves to worship no god but God, to abjure all the idols of power and prestige that marginalize God’s little ones. We are joining with Jesus, the disciples and prophets in the mission to use every key we can get our hands on to free prisoners and to fling open the doors of full access to the goods of creation for each and every daughter and son of the living God.

Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” may make us uncomfortable. It also turns the tables and asks us, “Who do you say you are?”

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