

210a, 2017

In today's gospel we recall a high point in Jesus' relationship with his disciples. It represents a quantum leap in their understanding of who Jesus really is. And even then, as subsequent events in the rest of the gospel clearly indicate, they still did not fully understand the implications of what they had just begun to realize.

The passage today begins with Jesus asking his disciples who people think he is and in reply the disciples give various answers: the prophet John the Baptist risen from the dead; the prophet Elijah, who was expected to return to earth as a sign of the imminent coming of the Messiah; the prophet Jeremiah and so forth... But then Jesus retched it up a notch and asked them the crucial question of faith: But who do you say that I am?

Was there awkward silence, as the disciples looked down at their sandals or looked around at each other in order to see who would risk speaking first? Jesus was flushing them out of their safety, like a bird dog scaring a group of quail into flight. This was a pop test that the disciples were not expecting and one they surely did not want to fail.

You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, blurted out Peter. Perhaps his hand was waving in the air like a first-grader trying to please a teacher, straining to give the right answer before anyone else in the class. Or more likely he almost whispered his answer, unsure and tentative. We do not know. But what followed seemed to them quiet strange. If Peter got it right, then why couldn't they begin telling everyone, shouting it from the mountaintops? You would have expected Jesus to elevate Peter to the head of the class and then form a strategy for the disciples to begin spreading this good news. But instead Jesus finished the class session with the enigmatic and strict command: Tell no one that I am the Christ. But why...

Well, one reason for the prohibition of spreading the announcement that Jesus was the Messiah was because the populace held a misguided understanding of what those words truly meant. The general understanding of those words would have inspired nationalistic hopes that Jesus had come to free Israel from Roman occupation, to usher in a new day of Israeli independence, a return to the “good old days” of King David and King Solomon. Jesus knew that there was much more work that needed to be done and a cross upon which to die before the Jews could begin to adjust their expectation and definition of what kind of Messiah Jesus came to be. But again, the time was not yet right. They were not ready to hear the redefinition of what the title, Messiah, truly meant.

But the other reason Jesus told the disciples to keep silent was that they were not yet ready to bear the burden, or face the consequences, of their profession of faith, before attempting to share it with others. Isn't this the way it is with all of us as well? How many times do we say the right words, but have very little comprehension of what those words will mean for us in the future.

After all, how many brides and grooms who pledge to love each other “in sickness and health, for richer and poorer, until death do us part” have any idea what their vows will mean? Do they really understand what it is like to love a spouse through a long and debilitating illness or through a financial collapse or simply through the years as time carves wrinkles and frailty into their youthful bodies? How can they understand what all their words will mean on the day of their wedding? Actually, at the moment they recite their vows, many couples are just trying not to faint.

It is the same way with the words of faith. When we first learn the great creeds of the Church, or to pray the words of the rosary or to sing

the great hymns of the saints, we have little understanding of the depth and mystery of those words. And that is fine. We put these great words on, like children dressing up in a parent's clothing, in the hope that one day they will grow into the clothing themselves. And God smiles approvingly, knowing that if we pay attention to life, we will also grow into our words of faith. It may be suffering that carves patience into our understanding or our failures along the way that carves humility—the point is, we grow into our words gradually across the span of our lives. Just as those who have faced starvation understand how good it is to have food in a different way than regularly well-fed do. Even so, perhaps only the seriously sinful can know how amazing it is to be forgiven. And only those who have wrestled with God and with the great questions of life and faith, can know the depth of mystery and confidence that comes from a tested faith.

There now follows in today's gospel a passage which will be the foundation for the authority given to Peter in the post-Resurrection community. In response to Peter's declaration of faith, Jesus now says: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. In the English translation, the play on words here is lost. But in the Greek, Peter is Petros and rock is petra while, in the Aramaic language which Jesus and his disciples normally spoke, both words would be represented by kepa, or as we say, rock.

And so St. Peter got the question right, but he needed time to grow into it before he was ready to share it with others. He did not yet understand or approve of a Messiah who will suffer, and who calls his followers to bear a cross along with him. He did not yet understand that even death does not get the last word, or the last laugh, over those who give up their lives in the service to Christ. He did not yet understand how fickle was his own faith, and how easily he could deny knowing the Lord when pressed by a curious little girl around a charcoal

fire. Peter did not know yet, but he soon would-- after Calvary and after the resurrection of Jesus, he then would have grown into a faith, so boldly spoken of earlier in his life.

Today we see in the pope the successor of Peter. He shares the same charism or gift of leadership, a leadership of service. Traditionally the popes have called themselves *Servus servorum Dei*, the servant of the servants of God.

The pope is not meant to be a dictator with absolute powers, but sadly in the past, we have had popes who acted in such a manner. Rather he is limited by the faith of the whole Church. He is not the originator of that faith; he does not decide what we should believe. Rather, he communicates to the Church at large what it already believes. He is the focal point of unity of that one faith. His purpose, and the purpose of all our religious leaders, is to encourage a greater encounter with Christ.

Unfortunately, we often hear such phrases as: I used to feel close to God, but not now; I used to be able to pray more easily, but I can't pray that easily any longer; my religion used to mean a great deal to me, but now it been reduced to a weekend Mass, at best. At this point I have to ask an embarrassing question: Well then, who moved? After all, prayer is simply talking with Jesus, or sitting down with Him with a comfort that a husband and wife feel by merely being present to one another while in the same room. Too often we try to apply answers to questions that we learned in our early religion classes to our much more complex, adult world, with all of its complicated issues. After all, we update ourselves in our fields of work, rather it be in the office or how to best take care of our children. As always, we need help in struggling to answer, or at least address, life's difficulties. And that's why we need the Church. And while it is true that some feel closer to

God when beholding the beauty of God's creation while on a hike or on a river, it must not be forgotten that God the Father sent His Son, the one we call Jesus, into our world for a purpose. And so the question looms: how can we love someone we do not know? Our encounter with Jesus is greatly helped by reading/ studying about Him in the scriptures and through spiritual writers.

And so I ask: may not the dark times in our spiritual lives, when we feel our lives to be God-forsaken, be compared to the time that Jesus himself cried out: My God, my God why have you forsaken me? You see, we are not alone in the dark moments of our lives. In her diary, Mother Theresa admitted that she hadn't felt a close relationship with Jesus for years...and yet she kept on being the hands and heart of Jesus while here on earth.

In a Church where there are now so many conflicting theologies and spiritualities, but still there is one body and one Spirit...there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, there is one God and Father of us all, who is Lord of all, who works through all and is in all.

Several years ago, I was flying from Oakland to Medford, Oregon when a man with huge tattooed arms sat next to me; his shirt was open to his navel while I sat there with my neatly buttoned down shirt. I don't quite remember how it happened, but at some point, we began to talk with one another. I told him that I was a priest and he said that he was heavily into drugs, but joined a Christian commune who helped him to be free of the drugs by introducing him to Jesus Christ. He helped supporting the commune by being a wrestler at the various logging camps in northern California and southern Oregon.

I learned something that day: the cover doesn't explain the book and that religion is all about an encounter, a personal encounter with our lord Jesus Christ and that we should take a risk and share our thoughts

about discipleship, even with people with whom we do not feel an immediate connection...

Now there is a question that I would like to leave with you, and myself this day: has my encounter with Jesus changed my way of thinking, my way of doing???(repeat).