

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Readings: Isaiah 22:19-23; Romans 11:33-36; Matthew 16:13-20
Theme: Peter's confession: You are the Christ!
Symbols: Large rock and a set of keys

Introduction

- Last week, a moment of insight for Jesus via the Canaanite woman.
- This week, another moment of insight, this time through Peter.
- So, two main characters in conversation: Jesus and Peter.
- The topic of conversation: the identity of Jesus. Who is Jesus? Who is he really?
- Peter: a colourful character! Often portrayed as a strong personality who wasn't afraid to 'have a go'. But he didn't always 'get it right'... Sometimes had 'foot in mouth' (e.g. next week's gospel). But today we see him in what is perhaps his finest hour. Speaking with clarity, insight, conviction, faith.
- Jesus declares him the 'rock' on which the church is to be built, and offers him the 'keys to the kingdom'. (Refer to symbols)

Song

Pause to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit who guides our hearts.

Prayer: Come Holy Spirit, be with us as we ponder Jesus in the Word.

Personal experience

- The Gospel story centres on Jesus' question: Who do people say I am?
 - Sounds like an age-old quest for meaning: Who am I? What's the meaning of my life? What's my place in the world?
 - Questions that come from the depths of the human search for meaning.
 - Questions often asked by the young, but not only the young.
 - Questions that have been expressed in so many ways: teenage rebellion, treks to Nepal, the pop songs of the 60s... all part of the human search for identity and meaning.
 - Have you ever asked questions like that?
 - (Share an example)
 - Pause to reflect for a moment.
 - But there is something a little different to the way Jesus asks it. Let's listen...

Read the Gospel

Read the Gospel slowly.

Breaking Open the Word

- ‘Who do you say I am?’
- If Jesus is asking an age-old question: who am I? What is different about the way he asks it?
- We don’t see him alone on a mountain top saying ‘Who am I?’ We see him turn his community, to his closest friends who know and love him best, and say: But you, who do YOU say I am?
- Why is this important? Although ‘who am I’ is a precious question. It can easily become a self-centred and futile one. If we try to just work it out ourselves, introspective, in-turning, navel-gazing, we get nowhere.
- What Jesus shows is that we cannot understand ourselves except in relation to others who know us and love us. The question is never just ‘who am I?’ but ‘To whom do I belong?’
- Jesus’ question is a *belonging* question. First he asks what the people are saying... the crowds out there, the people he has taught, healed... The answers are varied... John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah... in other words, he is hearing things like ‘a holy man, a miracle worker, a prophet, a visionary, a leader...’
- But then he comes to the point: Who do YOU say I am? You who are my closest friends, who have travelled the way, who have been with me night and day, who have listened to me in ways no one else has...
- Pow! In a moment of grace / insight, Peter is able to articulate the truth with great clarity: You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.
- In other words: the one foretold by the Scriptures, the Messiah, the anointed one, the one in whom we find salvation, there is no one else. You are ‘it’: our Lord and Saviour.
- How might Jesus have felt at that moment? Perhaps deep down he knew. But to hear it validated with such power and clarity by Peter. In the midst of community, he feels known at his deepest core.
- *Have you ever had an experience like that? An experience of being known. When someone fed back to you the essential goodness and truth about yourself. How did you feel? Surprised? Relieved? Understood?*
 - Share an example
- Jesus responds with joy. Good for you! You are a happy man! Why? Because Peter is so clever? No. ‘Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven.’ In other words, Jesus recognises this as a moment of grace. Peter speaks under divine inspiration. He confesses Jesus as ‘the Christ’. And Jesus calls him to a new stage of his life:
 - Not just one of the Twelve, but the one who is to lead the Twelve.
 - He is to be called ‘Peter’, which means ‘rock’.
 - He is given an authority which is to be foundational to the establishment of the church.
- This statement ‘You are the Christ’ holds climactic significance in this section of Matthew’s Gospel. Why? Not just because of what it means for Peter. Because it is the statement of faith at the heart of every Christian disciple. It is the core of baptism. Why seek baptism? Because Catholics are nice people? Because

Catholic schools have good teaching? Because we feel at home here? Yes, yes, yes, BUT...

All these answers are leading us to a deeper testimony: because we believe Jesus is the Christ.

- It is a statement about my belief in Christ, but always in the context of belonging to a community. I need you, to believe in Christ. I can't really know Christ without you. Your support, your love, your faith.

Read the Gospel again.

- This time, reflect:
 - 'How would I answer the question 'Who is Jesus'?
 - What does Jesus mean to me, to my life?
 - What does it mean to discover Jesus through belonging to a community?

Gospel Sharing

- Any comments/insights at this stage?

Living the Word

A challenge to think about in the week ahead:

1. Keep pondering this question: Who is Jesus in my life?
2. Develop a habit of turning to those who know and love you in order to understand more about yourself. [Emergency phone nos. 'Remind me of my goodness!'] Are there Catholic Christians in my life to whom I can turn for that kind of support? Keep developing your community networks. [Mention some parish gatherings coming up.]

Breaking Open the Tradition

We have just heard a sacred story from our Scriptures. How has this Gospel continued to breathe life into the church over the centuries?

1. The testimony of faith. We believe that Jesus is the Christ. This question continued to be hotly contested in the early centuries of Christianity. Who is Jesus? How can he be God and human? Some groups: exaggerated his humanity, others his divinity. In the fourth century, at the Council of Nicea, a pronouncement was made to settle this once and for all. Jesus is both truly God and truly man. Officially settled, but the 'Who is Jesus' question continues to confront believers. In 2001, Pope John Paul II set forth a pastoral plan for the new millennium, and his first tenet was to call the church to 'contemplate the face of Christ'. Back to basics: who is Jesus. Keep reflecting on this in prayer, in faith.

See *Landmarks* Leaflet

2. The testimony of the community. As Catholics we believe that our faith statements, no matter how personal, are always made in the context of a community of faith. Our

belonging is essential to our belief. You can't just go off and make up your own beliefs; you have to move with the community. That's why sometimes developments in the church can seem slow. Because we have 2000 years of history and tradition and cultures all over the world to take into account. We are continually reflecting and evolving, but carefully and slowly to make sure that development is in keeping with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and not just the fashions of the times.

What if we find ourselves struggling with a particular teaching? Does that mean I'm 'out'? No, the important thing is that you struggle 'with' the community, respectfully, lovingly, honestly, seeking understanding, unity.

3. The authority given to Peter has developed in the Catholic Church into what we know as the papacy. Catholics believe that the Bishops are the successors of the Apostles, and that the Pope, as one of those Bishops, is the successor of the apostle Peter. Just as Peter was given a special role of authority within the group of apostles, so does the Pope have a role of primacy within the body (or college) of Bishops. Tradition has it that Peter went to Rome – which was the centre of the known world – and was martyred there. Consequently, the Pope is the Bishop of Rome. As the Bishop of Rome he has a particular position of primacy. Catholics look to the Pope as a focus of unity within the church and guardian of the truth of the faith which has been handed down.

See: *Catholic Story* leaflet no.13 'Priesthood'

Closing Prayer

General Discussion

With sponsor or small group of 3-4:

- Share one thing that stayed with you during this session.
- Any questions? Anything confusing?
- 'How would I answer the question 'Who is Jesus'?'
- What does Jesus mean to me, to my life?
- What does it mean to discover Jesus through belonging to a community?