

21st SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A 2020

Isaiah 22:19-23 Romans 11:33-36 Matthew 16:13-20

Reflection

Fr Tao Pham

Dear sisters and brothers, when Jesus directly asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” The various answers show that Jesus was seen as a prophetic figure. Still those answers are only approximations to the mystery of Jesus. Jesus rejected these inadequate views of others and demanded that his disciples speak for themselves. Peter speaks on their behalf and proclaims Jesus as “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Up to this point, that was the best confession and the highest tribute that could be made to him. Jesus tells Peter he has not gained this understanding on his own but that it is a gift from God. Then Jesus reciprocated. While Peter was simply acknowledging what Jesus always was, Jesus confers a new title on Peter. Peter will be the foundation stone of the new people of God (the Church).

Notice Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of God.” Did we accurately quote Peter? Is that what he said? No! We deleted the word “living.” Peter believed that Jesus was the Son of the living God. Peter knew that our God is One who is alive and not dead. We do not serve a dead God, but a living God. When Peter said that Jesus was the Son of God, he declared that he believed Jesus was God himself. A review of John 10:33 and 36 reveals that the meaning of the phrase “Son of God” referred to deity. Notice, that in John 10:36 Jesus stated that they had accused Him of blasphemy when He said He was the “Son of God.” That is, “son of God” meant “God.” Therefore, Peter declared that Jesus was God. Peter was correct and his statement was powerful.

The story shows that the primacy of Peter was not something that was invented by the Church later on. It went right back to the beginning, yes, to the mind and will of Jesus himself. The failures of Popes throughout history do not contradict Jesus’ promise that the gate of hell would not prevail against the Church. The Church’s true foundation is Christ himself. The Pope is his servant, not his substitute. Jesus forbade the disciples to speak openly of this confession, given that it would undoubtedly have been misinterpreted, and would have led to false hopes.

Dear sisters and brothers, take the Creed that we recite every Sunday. Two thirds of it relate to what we believe about Jesus. The Creed is a development of what kernel proclaimed by Peter. It is easier for us today to profess the faith. We have 2000 years of tradition and the teaching of various councils to guide us. But it is important to make the answer our own. To believe, not simply because the Church says so, but out of personal conviction. Each of us must face the perennial question posed by Jesus. "Who do you say that I am?" This is a question not only for the early followers of Jesus but for each of us every day of our life, "Who do you say that I am?"

So many today, even Christians, think of Jesus as a good man and a good moral teacher, but do not consider Him to be God and Lord. For many, there is a real lack of knowledge about what the Scriptures say of Jesus. For the early followers of Jesus, it was clear that if they believed in Jesus, they could only believe in Him as God and Lord. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Scriptures, the fulfillment of the prophecies of a Messiah, of an Anointed One, of the Savior who was to come. A person can't be baptized without a profession of faith. At baptism we are asked: 'Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died, and was buried, rose from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father?'

The Gospels do not spare Peter. True, they show that there was a solid side to his character. But they also show there was an opposite side to his character. On the night Jesus was on trial for his life, instead of standing by him. Peter denied him not once but three times. That was his lowest moment.

The Peter who said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' in the Gospel of this weekend, was the same Peter who said, 'I do not know this man' (Mt 26:74). If it was a different Peter, that would explain everything. But it was the same Peter. Still, we might be inclined to say, 'Ah, but the first Peter, was the real Peter.' This would be a mistake. There was only one Peter.

No one would have been surprised had Jesus written Peter off at this point, as being weak, cowardly, and unreliable. But he didn't, instead, he restored him to where he was before, and made him the chief shepherd of his flock. Why? Because he knew that there was another and better side to Peter. Generosity and selfishness, courage and cowardice, can co-exist in the same person.

We remember that, Judas' betrayal was a planned thing, and was carried out in a cold, calculating manner. Peter's denial was not a planned thing, and was the

result of weakness rather than malice. But he didn't fall simply because he is weak. He fell because he thought he was strong.

In giving authority to the man who denied him, Jesus showed that he was establishing his Church not on human strength, but on his own love and faithfulness. The denial was a very humbling and chastening experience for Peter. But he learned two great lessons from that it.

Dear sisters and brothers, through the highs and lows of Peter there are some lessons to be learned for our spiritual life.

Firstly, we can learn the first lesson from the Gospels is that Peter knew Jesus was God in human flesh, but yet he still sinned. Peter was one who believed in Jesus, but he still sinned. He was still a tool Satan could use. This means we are engaged in a spiritual battle. We are in serious warfare and we are the potential victims. We need to put on the Armor of God and fight the good fight. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses." (1Timothy 6:12)

Secondly, Peter learned a painful truth about himself. He learned that he wasn't as strong or as brave as he thought he was. It is important that those in positions of leadership be aware of their weaknesses and limitations. Humility is what kept Peter (even in spite of his brusque, rash personality) close to Our Lord. Humility is a dying to self. So, while we may not ever face crucifixion in the literal sense, we are called to die to our egos and our pride.

And Thirdly, Peter learned a wonderful truth about Jesus. He learned that in spite of his denials, Jesus still loved him. It was love that enabled him to turn an hour of pain and shame into an hour of grace and salvation. And this time, through the Gospel, we know that Peter did not fail Jesus. He led the early Church and, like his Master, gave his life for his sheep.

Dear sisters and brothers, God doesn't choose perfect people to do his work – there are no such people. God chooses human beings who are flawed, but nevertheless have a capacity for greatness and holiness. In them we see the power of grace working through human weakness and sinfulness.

Peter is a great consolation to us. The frailties we see in him we recognize in ourselves. Courage fails us all. In the end, all of us were mere mortals who are inconstant in our beliefs. But we must not judge ourselves or others by momentary lapses, but by commitment over a long time to our beliefs. But Peter is also a

great challenge to us. He didn't belong to some superior race or species. He was made of the same human material as ourselves. We too can become better than we are.

When Jesus first speaks to Peter, he addresses him as "Simon, son of Jonah," but then he changes his name to "Peter," which means "rock." Jesus states that he will build his Church upon this rock. As a true witness to Christ and his resurrection, Peter will be the foundation of the Church, no power of evil or death will be able to overcome the Church. Jesus, in speaking of the Church, is speaking of a community of believers. Jesus gives Peter the keys to the kingdom, along with the power of binding and loosing. This recalls the words of Isaiah (22:22), who spoke of a new ruler of Judea who would be given the key to the House of David and would have the power to open and shut access whenever he wished. The power of binding and loosing refers to the power of interpreting the Law, as well as the power to cut people off from the community. The key is the symbol of authority Peter receives from Jesus.

Our faith does not come because we are more brilliant than others who lack faith. It comes as a gift, and inspiration from God, as it did for Peter. If we can say with Peter that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and truly believe what we say, we do so by the grace of God. When we profess faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, we have to bring that faith into our daily lives. Somehow we must reflect the presence of Christ in the world.

Peter's story helps us to understand ourselves. The frailty we see in him we see in ourselves. In our life, sometimes we are highs and sometimes we are lows. However, we must not be allowed ourselves to be discouraged by our weakness or demoralized by our failures. Peter's story also shows us how to develop a close relationship with Jesus. Without a warm relationship with Christ, we are only the fringes of Christianity. We are like someone talking about love compared with someone who is in love.

Dear sisters and brothers, Jesus asks his disciples this question in this weekend's Gospel. He asks us the same question, "Who do you say I am?" Asking this question, he is not seeking a textbook response or for us to repeat what others have said about him. He wants to hear our personal response. May we answer his question as truthfully as possible, and then listen as he speaks to us. Amen.

I miss all of you so much and I hope everyone in our Parishes be well and peaceful. Take care and stay safe at home my sisters and brothers.

May almighty God bless you and be with you and your family in this hard lockdown time!

Fr Tao Pham