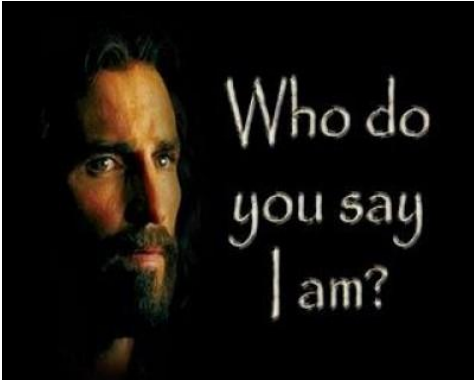


Homily for Sunday, September 12, 2021 – 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Back in the mid-1980s, I had a part-time job to help pay my way through university. (Now you need 12 part-time jobs just to pay for one semester, but that’s another story). My boss, at the time, occasionally dropped a pearl of wisdom on my lap. One day he said something so profound that I’m still pondering it 35 years later. Ready? Here it comes. He said, “Every day, I have to shave.” That’s it. Why would I remember that? Because there is a lot packed into that short sentence. What it means is: I have to live with the person I see in the mirror each day. I have to strive daily—even if I fall short daily--to be a person of integrity.

When I ponder all three readings we have today, they are strong invitations—each in their own way—for me and for us to be people of integrity. How do we do that? How do we become that, more and more? I think it is tied up with Peter’s profound answer in the gospel when he said about Jesus, **“You are the Christ.”** If we can figure out what it means to be the Christ, we will be well on our way to living lives of integrity. We will never have problems living with the person we see in the mirror.

Not that the readings are vague; they’re absolutely clear, but here is a story from the great storyteller John Shea that might help.

A king had two servants. He told the first servant to do something. The servant did it and was promoted. He told the second servant to do something. The servant did not do it and was fired. The servant who was promoted lived very, very well in the king’s service and continued to obey the king and be promoted. One day, however, his thoughts turned to the servant who had disobeyed the king and been fired. So, he went to visit him. He arrived at the house where the man used to live, but he was no longer there. A neighbour said that he had sold the house and moved to a much smaller one. When the first servant arrived at the place where the second servant now lived, he realized that “house” was too kind a word. It was a hovel, a shack. The first servant knocked on the door, and a voice said, “Come in.” The second servant was sitting on a dirt floor eating a very thin soup. The servant who had been promoted smiled. “If you had learned to obey the king, you would not have to eat thin soup,” he said. The servant who had been fired said, “If you had learned how to eat thin soup, you would not have to obey the king!”

Obedience to the king is rewarded; disobedience is punished. What else is new? The obedient servant is in a good position, it seems, with promotions. The disobedient has fallen on hard times living in a crappy house and eating thin soup. We might even be tempted to say this guy brought it on to himself. But this servant remained true to himself, true to values that guided his life. He could tolerate lesser conditions in order to remain free to obey or disobey the king. The obedient servant compromised his integrity for material things. Who is in better spiritual shape in the end? We, of course, want it both ways. We want to obey the king and be considered by others as a man/woman of integrity. Spiritual masters, like Jesus, draw a line in the sand and ask us to choose. I admire people who can say, "I will not do it" when challenged to compromise their personal integrity for the path of success. These are the people who are really at peace; these are the people who have learned to live with the person in the mirror.

Here comes, for me, the connection with Peter's profession of faith in today's gospel account when he correctly refers to Jesus as, "You are the Christ." The word "Christ" means the anointed one. That is where we get the word "chrism" (holy oil) from. To anoint means to set apart. We were all anointed, at our baptism, with chrism. In other words, we were set apart to share in the mission of Christ. Literally, you were made a Christ. Your life, from baptism onward, was a mission and still is a mission. The mature Christian strives to integrate that mission into their everyday life. To say to someone without adequate clothing and lacking food, "**Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill**" is no way being faithful to the mission Christ gave us in baptism. To merely talk about societal problems, like poverty, as simply a problem politicians should deal with, is an abdication of our mission as Christians. When we do that, we choose to not look in the mirror but turn the mirror on others while saying, "this guy eating thin soup brought it on to himself." Pity without compassion is never the Christian response. Jesus never pitied anyone, but felt compassion towards everyone in need. Pity keeps us at an arm's length from people and their struggles. Compassion ("com" = with; "passion" = suffer) means we are willing to *suffer with* another person in their struggle. Pity keeps us passively feeling sorry for someone, where compassion actively move us to offer help. A man/woman of integrity, integrates and activates their faith with concrete works.

To be the Christ, Jesus didn't just talk about taking up his cross, he actually did it. His integrity was born of fidelity to a dream. The dream he never wavered from is called the Kingdom of God. God opened Jesus' ears to it and Jesus was never rebellious saying, "I don't want to hear that; sing something more appealing to my ears." When being faithful to God's kingdom cost him, he responded by allowing them to pull out his beard, offering his back to be struck and did not hide his face to insults and spitting. He, instead, set his face like flint seeing only God's will and, knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God would vindicate him.

What does it mean to say that through the Cross of Christ we are redeemed? A feeble attempt to explain this. When we **react** to others, we give back to them what they gave us, good or bad. You give me a Christmas gift, and I'll give you one in return. You shower me with compliments, and I will return the favor by saying good things about you. But it cuts the other way, too. You

scowl at me in the communion line, and I'll flatten your tires before you can leave church. Jesus says, "If you only loan money to those who will pay you back with interest, what good is that? Even the Gentiles, the non-believers, will do as much for one another." But what about us who call ourselves Christian? Are we not called to go beyond the world of reaction? The world of reaction is the world most of us live in, most of the time. It's the tit-for-tat world where if you pull out my beard, I'll pull out yours; if you insult me, I'll insult you; if you turn your back on me, I'll turn my back on you. Nothing ever changes or goes forward in that world. Eventually, it deteriorates into violence begetting more violence. No one in that type of world is willing to make a sacrifice for the greater good; no one in that world is willing to take up the cross.

However, besides the world of reaction, there is the world of **response**. This is our hope, our good news. Jesus is the Christ, the anointed One, the model for our Christian lives, because he never reacts but always responds. The divine, living in both Jesus and in you and me, is the ability to respond, not react. Hit me, I'll turn the other cheek. Take my coat, I'll give you my shirt as well. Make me walk a mile, I'll willingly walk another mile. Why? Because the inner reality is so strong in me that I don't have to sink into the world of reaction that you are forcing me into. I am sovereignly free to respond from the true depth of who I am. Anyone who attempts to talk Jesus out of taking up his own cross, of not going to Jerusalem and undergoing death and resurrection, of sinking into the world of reaction, is set straight.

In following Jesus, we will have to learn to suffer, to sacrifice, to eat lean soup, but our integrity and ultimate vindication will never be in doubt. In learning to eat lean soup, we won't have to obey the kings of this world for the real king, Jesus, will alone satisfy our deepest hungers and thirsts.

Fr. Phil