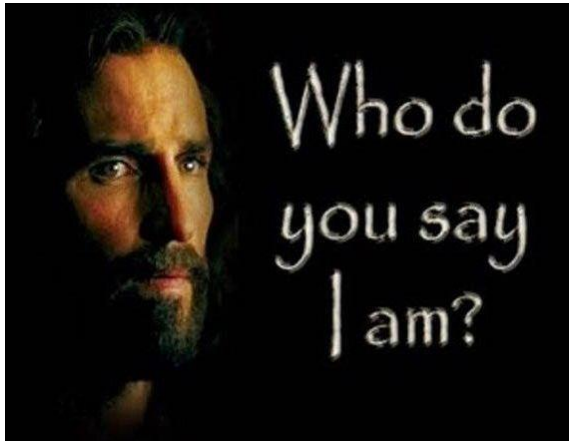


## Homily – September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024 – 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time



Do we ever know who another person really is?

Do we ever know who we, ourselves, are?

Sixteen years ago, I participated at a Men's Rite of Passage Retreat (M.R.O.P.) in Southern California with 50 other men of various ages and backgrounds. After the first night's talk, the assignment was to go back to our cabins and to share with the other men in our cabin this way.

Each man was to describe himself to the others in 10 ways beginning with the clause, "I am..." Since we were all strangers to each other, the sharing was a little superficial, initially. It went something like, "I am a 42 year old man... I am an engineer... I am married... I am a father of three, etc." By the second night, we were to return to our cabins and to repeat the same process of the night before describing ourselves in 10 ways beginning, again, with the words, "I am..." This time, because of bonds of trust and confidentiality, we were all able to peel back the onion and go to deeper levels in describing ourselves. The sharing was more like, "I am the black sheep of my family... I am an alcoholic on the verge of destroying my marriage... I am addicted to gambling, drugs, or porn" etc.

I think that's what is going on in today's gospel. The layers of the onion are being peeled back, the truth is being revealed about Jesus, and some people are scandalized by the truth. The first level of revelation has Jesus asking his apostles about the public opinion. When you talk to people about me, what are they saying? It's like asking people who they thought won the presidential debate the other night. Depending on peoples' biases, you get all kinds of answers, even contradictory answers. The apostles give some plausible but wrong answers like, "Some people say you're the return from the dead of John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the Prophets."

Then comes the next layer of the onion to be removed. The disclosure of Jesus' identity is now moved to a more personal level. Jesus wants something deeper from people who should know him in ways the crowd doesn't. So, he asks his inner circle, "Guys, **who do you say that I am?**" Peter gives the brilliant and true answer, "**You are the Christ.**" Peter has the right answer but not the right meaning. Jesus is the Christ, the chosen one of God, alright, but Peter's idea of what it means to be the Christ is distorted and completely wrong. No wonder Jesus calls him Satan. Who is Satan? Satan is the one who distorts the truth, who always tells lies. Satan literally means "the accuser."

Jesus says to Peter, "**Get behind me.**" In other words, "Get in my following, Peter. Let me lead you into the truth of who I am. Anyone who intends to follow me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me, and I will show you how."

Now we are very close to getting what seems to be missing in this story—level three. If level one of the peeling back of this onion was public opinion, then level two is Peter's profession, "You are the Christ." However, what seems to be missing for me is level three—Jesus' confession about how he sees himself. A part of me wants Jesus to just lay it all out there and say, "I've heard about what you, the crowd, has to say about me, I've heard Peter's answer, now I going to answer my own question by revealing myself to you." Just as I pull up a chair and wait with bated breath for Jesus' self-disclosure... I get silence. I want to hear it from the "horse's mouth", but my demands are not met. This disappointment is more Jesus' disappointment than mine. It's as if Jesus is saying to us what he said to Philip at the Last Supper, "**You've been with me all this time, Philip, and you still don't know me?**" (Jn. 14:9)

It appears that Jesus has a better way of revealing the truth about himself other than public opinion and Peter's confession. Jesus chooses to reveal himself in the world of action over and against words alone. Let's just admit it, words are cheap. I don't care whose mouth

they come out of, words are cheap. What's not cheap are words that are followed by actions. Sometimes the actions are so powerful and revealing words aren't even unnecessary. At some point, Jesus just stopped talking about taking up his own cross, suffer, and dying, and he just did it. James says something similar in that second reading when he said, "Look at my works and they will tell you everything about my faith, for faith without works is absolutely useless."

This is Mark's Gospel. The opening line of Mark's gospel says, "This is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." What does it mean to be the Christ, the Son of God, and why is this good news? As the gospel unfolds, Jesus is showing us over and over what it means to be the Christ, the Son of God. But over and over again, nobody seems to get it. Peter gets the right answer but clearly the wrong meaning of what it means for Jesus to be the Christ. Peter, like so many, thought that if Jesus was the Christ, the Anointed One of God, then he should stage a military coup, overthrow the Romans by power and force and usher in the Kingdom of God. That will show them! Peter wanted the Messiah to triumph over the Romans. Instead Jesus is talking about laying down his life for the "enemy." The gospel of Mark ends with one person--one unlikely person--a Roman soldier, who gets it. Looking up at the cross, the soldier said, "Truly, this was the Son of God" (Mk. 15:39).

What does it mean to be the Christ, the Son of God? I think one of the ways that Jesus saves us is that he never allowed himself to get sucked into the world of reaction. You and I are almost totally mechanical. We react from one thing to another. It's like a knee-jerk reaction. In the world of reaction, I always give you back what you give me. Slap me and I'll slap you back. Give me a Christmas present and I'll buy one for you. It's all tit-for-tat. Jesus says, "Even the gentiles (those not connected to God) will do that much for each other." But what about you who are connected to God? Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; the centurion got it right. To be the Son of God is to live in the world of response and not simply the world of reaction. Jesus was so much in touch with the divine living in him that he could live above the laws of reaction. Hit him and he would not react by hitting you back. Take his

coat, and he would not react by taking your coat; instead, he would respond by giving you his shirt. Make him walk a mile, and he would not react by making you walk a mile; instead he would walk a second mile. Jesus' ear was open to God's will and he was not rebellious. He didn't run from those who struck him but offered his back. He didn't react to peoples' insults and spitting but responded out of love by not hiding his face.

Love always responds from its true nature, its rootedness in God, even when we are being forced into the world of reaction. Maybe that's the world Jesus is inviting Peter to enter into—the world of response. Get behind me. Get in my following, Peter, and I will lead you out of the world of reaction, the world of escalating violence, and I will lead you into the world of response. Perhaps that's what the centurion saw on the Cross, a violence that was not reacted to with more violence but responded to with love and forgiveness. Maybe that's what it means to stop thinking like humans do and start thinking like God does.

*~Fr. Phil*