

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Isaiah 22:19-23 / Matthew 16:13-20)
24.08.2014

Dear brothers and sisters,

Today's gospel passage is all about the identity and the mission of the two protagonists: Jesus and Peter.

Let us begin with Jesus.

Jesus puts this question to his disciples: "Who do people say **the Son of Man** is?" That is to say: Who do people say **I** am? This question of Jesus to his disciples is also addressed to each one of us here and now. Jesus asks us: Who do **you** say I am?

First, we have to listen to Peter's answer to Jesus' question and receive his answer as a profession of faith, a revelation: "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God**".

"You are the Christ", that is to say you are the Messiah, the Saviour, the one foretold and expected by the prophets. What kind of Saviour is Jesus? Jesus is not the powerful political liberator that many of his contemporaries awaited, but a humble servant who comes to save us from the slavery of sin through his merciful forgiveness and from the fear of death by his promise of a share in his own victory over death.

"You are the Son of the Living God". By these words, Peter recognizes that Jesus enjoys a unique filial relationship with God and that he has received from his heavenly Father an unequalled mission for the salvation of humankind. He is the Son who was sent to reveal his Father's infinite love for every human being. His mission is to reveal to all that they are God's adoptive sons and daughters.

This is Peter's answer to Jesus' question. His answer is solid food to nourish our life of faith.

Now we are invited to give our own answer, a personal response, to Jesus' question: this answer must be born of our personal experience of a life of faith with Jesus.

"Who do **you** say I am?"

I propose a few pointers which could be part of our answer to Jesus' question. But all these would need to be specified by our own personal experience of faith. Some other points could be added.

Jesus is **the Word of God**, through which God speaks to us. When we read not only the gospels, but also the whole of the Bible, it is Jesus who speaks to us through the Scriptures on behalf of God his Father. When we read the Bible, does it not happen that a verse seems to be addressed to us personally, to our life in the here and now? It appears to us as if this verse was written especially for us, for our situation. This is Jesus at work in our life: Jesus, the living Word of God, who speaks to us personally. Jesus is really the Word of God.

Jesus is also the one who gives himself to us as food and drink for the journey **in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist**.

By the gift of his body given up for us, Jesus invites us to give our lives for our brothers and sisters, serving them and loving them.

By the gift of his blood poured out for us, Jesus seals a new covenant of love with his people, with each one of us. Jesus is God's presence to us, always beside us, when life runs smoothly as well as when all goes wrong. He is there for us always, ever ready to help us and rekindle our hope.

By the gift of his blood, Jesus also forgives our sins and delivers us from death. Jesus gave his life to reconcile us with the Father. He forgives our sins even when we can't forgive ourselves for having committed them. By dying on the cross and rising from the dead, Jesus set us free from the anguish of death. Death is not an end but a passage toward fullness of life in communion with the Lord.

Jesus is the great **master of prayer**, who lives in our hearts and prays unceasingly within us the prayer of the son which pleases the Father. We have just to become aware of Jesus' prayer in us and make it our own.

Jesus is **the one who calls us and sends us** in the great moments of our lives, when we have to make choices and take decisions. The sign of Jesus' presence in these circumstances and the proof that we are doing his will is the gift of his peace which we are given to experience at these moments.

It would be worthwhile for each one of us to take a little moment of time to give a personal answer to Jesus' question: "Who do you say I am?"

Let us come back to today's gospel passage. Peter, having answered Jesus' question about his identity, it then becomes Jesus' turn to give to Peter a name and a mission: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven". Jesus seems to give Peter a huge authority: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven". From the point of view of Peter, it is huge authority that has been confided to him. From our point of view, this is vital authority: it is the sign of the Lord's mercy. Let us tease this out.

Speaking about this, we could ask ourselves: how many of us consider ourselves bound by the authority of the bishop of Rome, St Peter's successor, or by the teaching of the Church?

The important thing to grasp and to remind ourselves of is that we cannot be a Christian on our own. We need the help of the Church in order to become disciples of Jesus. We can so easily convince ourselves that we know the mind of God and that, as a result, we are entitled to speak for God, to say what God's will is. But there is a huge risk here: Instead of speaking for God or on behalf of God, we can quickly end up speaking as though we are God.

To refer to the authority of the bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter, or to the teaching of the Church requires of us both humility and honesty so that we may understand the difference between the Word of God and our own words, what are simply our personal opinions. It requires of us a lot of humility to accept that we do not have all the answers, that we need the help of God and the need of Christ's Church and its living tradition. Once again, these requirements are vital for us.

By way of conclusion, we could ask ourselves: Who are we? What is our name in God's heart? What is the mission which has been confided to us by the Lord? And again, have we not forgotten our name? We might ask: What have we done with our mission? Perhaps we could take some time to answer these questions honestly. What is at stake is the happiness for which we long and which God alone can give us.