

August 27, 2023

St. Joseph Parish

10:00 a.m.

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (First Sunday Mass in St. Joseph)

Isn't it hard to believe that it's the end of August; in just a week, we'll be celebrating the Labor Day Holiday weekend, marking the unofficial end of Summer! Most of the college-age kids are already back at school; Our Lady of the Lake School here started back to school earlier this week; and I believe the Saint Joseph Public Schools return to begin the Fall semester this coming week.

That means that just about everyone's summer-time/vacation mode of living is returning to a more normal and scheduled way of life. And school schedules mean extra-curricular activities, High School Football and other Sports Programs, Classroom Instructions, and of course, every student's favorite aspect of School time---Homework and Exams.

Like all Teachers and as the Great Rabbi that He is, Jesus taught His disciples by asking questions on occasion. And that's what we heard in today's Gospel passage, as they were walking along, heading to the region of Caesarea Phillipi; Jesus decided to give them a kind of "pop quiz", with only two questions. So He asked them the first question: *"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"* That was a bit of a "softball" question; all they had to do was tell Jesus what they had been hearing other people say about Him during their recent travels. So they took turns saying: *"Some say John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."*

As we've heard over many of the Sundays in July and early August, Jesus has been teaching crowds of people about the Kingdom of Heaven, and He did that by using a number of Parables: the Parables about the Sower of the Seed, the Weeds and the Wheat, the Mustard Seed, the Pearl of great price, the Treasure buried in a field. And by means of each of those parables, Jesus was trying to find ways for the human mind to comprehend the Divine mysteries of God's Kingdom that Jesus wanted them to understand. The people who heard Him were spellbound. So, it's no wonder that they would have thought that Jesus was another great preacher like John the Baptist was; or like one of the great Prophets of Old who might have somehow come back to life.

But besides Jesus teaching about what the Kingdom of Heaven was like, Jesus had been showing people that the Kingdom was already there---in Him---not just through His teachings, but through all the other amazing things that He had been doing: healing the sick, cleansing lepers, exorcising demons, even raising the dead. Those were “signs” of someone much more than a Prophet. Jesus was trying to tell them that He is the Son of God---the Word made Flesh---the Holy One of God. He did that very clearly when He taught them *“I am the way, the Truth and the Life”*. He didn’t say: I’m one of the ways for you to consider; no, I’m THE Way. I AM Truth. I AM the Source of all Life.

Similarly not only did Jesus heal people’s physical maladies; He also healed their souls---He frequently told people *“Your sins are forgiven”*. That caused quite a stir, as people and the Religious Leaders as well, said: “Who but God alone can forgive sins?” And that’s right---ONLY God can say that and mean it.

So, Jesus was clear about Who He is. Now, He wanted---He needed---to know, who His closest followers thought He is. They weren’t just “people” who heard Him occasionally; they were the ones living with Him, following Him wherever He went; seeing everything He did and listening to everything He taught. After all this time, had He gotten through to them? Who did they think He is?

And so, He asked them the 2nd question: *“But who do YOU say that I am?”* And that’s when Simon Peter said before any of the others had a chance to say anything: *“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”* We have heard this Gospel account so many times, that perhaps it loses the sense of what a shock a statement like that would have been to anyone at that time who heard it. For Peter had just proclaimed that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the Holy One of God. Good and faithful Jews spent their entire lives waiting for the Messiah to come. For generations they had looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. Since their deliverance from Slavery in Egypt and making their 40-year pilgrimage to the Promised Land a thousand years before---they had looked forward to the One Who would come to set them free for all time, no longer slaves of, or oppressed by, anyone.

So, for Simon Peter to have said what he said was to say that Jesus was the One for Whom they had been waiting all their lives, and throughout their people’s history. It was not only shocking; it was also dangerous. As much as they longed for the promised Messiah, they also were leery of those who were “false

prophets”; and so, the Law was clear: anyone claiming to be the Messiah who wasn’t, was to be punished by death.

Jesus knew that Simon could not have come to this insight on his own; He knew that His Father’s Holy Spirit had enlightened Peter’s mind to not only come to that conclusion, but to be brave enough to say it out-loud. And that’s why Jesus said: *“Blessed are you, Simon...for flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but My heavenly Father.”* Peter passed the exam. Eventually so would all the other Apostles. But many others closed their minds and hardened their hearts to the Truth; and those with power eventually arranged to have Jesus crucified for blasphemy. Perhaps they thought that was the end of their problem. However, Jesus’ Resurrection proved them wrong; it proved that Jesus truly IS the Son of God.

We have a clear advantage over Peter and the Apostles; we already know the right answer. We know that Jesus is the Victor over sin and death; that His Resurrection has destroyed the power of sin and death, and that through our Faith in Jesus, we share in His Victory. However, knowing the right answer isn’t enough. It’s not enough to know “what other people” say about Jesus. It’s not enough even to know what the Church teaches about Jesus. The critical question is: what do I believe about Jesus?

We’re living at a time when more and more people see religion as irrelevant to their lives. Some people have never heard of Jesus; some others don’t believe that Jesus ever really existed. Many people know He lived, but only that He was someone special. Most people agree that He was a very Holy person and a Good Man---but no more than that. Yet Jesus told them, and us, exactly Who He is; He told us that He IS THE Way, the Truth, the Life; He told us that He IS the great “I Am”, the Name reserved ONLY for the God of all the Earth.

So, today, on this last Sunday in August; on this day when summer relaxation begins to return to school-time routines; on this Sunday in Ordinary Time----Jesus asks each of us: Who do YOU say that I am? Do you/do I really believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God? Do you/do I believe it deeply enough to impact the way we live our lives? If Jesus isn’t Who He said He said He was, then He isn’t anyone we need to pay attention to; BUT, if Jesus IS Who He said He is, our lives simply can’t remain unaffected. At a minimum, we need to be a part of the Church which Jesus built upon Peter, the Rock---the Church that the Apostles, and their Successors, spread throughout the world by their preaching, teaching

and good works. But, we need to do even more than just come to Church, or just know about Jesus; we need to personally come to know Who Jesus is. We need to know, and believe, and put all our faith and trust in the fact that, Jesus is “*the Christ*”; Jesus is “*the Son of the Living God*”.

When we believe that Jesus is our Lord and Savior, that belief needs to guide us in everything we say and do in our lives: in the way we cope with problems, in the way that we set our life priorities and values; how we spend our money. It should absolutely impact the way married couples love one another faithfully with the goal of helping each other get to heaven; in the way that Parents raise your children and pass on the Faith; in the way that children and young adults avoid the pitfalls of life’s numerous traps and temptations to sinful lifestyles. It should make THE difference in how we make the major decisions of our lives as we make our way through this world, because we know that our Home is in Heaven.

Naturally, our question might be “how do I do that?” Well, how do you get to know anyone at a level deeper than surface knowledge? By spending time; interacting; by having shared values. It’s the same with Jesus. First of all, we need to spend time in prayer, reflecting on God’s Word. Secondly we need to celebrate Jesus’ Presence by coming to Mass and receiving the Sacraments as regularly as possible, especially the Eucharist, the Real Presence of Christ. And finally, we need to do what Jesus did---to serve those in need through acts of charity, compassion and kindness; living a virtuous life as much as possible; and doing what Jesus did---always trying to follow God’s Will for us in our lives.

St. Paul literally sang God’s praises in today’s Second Reading in his Letter to the Romans when he wrote: “*Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God; how inscrutable are His judgments, and how unsearchable His ways. For who has known the mind of the Lord?*”

Can we “know the mind of the Lord”? That’s what Jesus wants us to do; to get to know Him; to spend time with Him in prayer. And when we know Him in that personal way, then we can love Him, even as we feel His love for us. That’s how we will pass the only Test that ultimately matters: to know and love Who Jesus is: *the Christ, the Son of the Living God*. And when we know and love Him, we will follow Him, even in the difficulties and challenges of these days in which we’re living, wherever He leads us throughout our lives, and right into Heavenly Glory.