

## 5 Easter B SML 2021

JN 15:1-8

Our Blessed Lord lived some 2000 years ago, in an obscure corner of the Earth. The obvious question from those of us who live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is what possible relation can I have with Him:

- ✓ Who lived in the first century,
- ✓ Who confined His life for thirty-three years between a crib and a cross
- ✓ and a few hundred square miles in Palestine?

Jesus presented Himself in history to proclaim God in human form, in exactly the same way that I am presenting to you right now, you and I:

- ✓ seeing,
- ✓ hearing,
- ✓ and touching (if it weren't for Coronavirus)

each other. We are evident to our senses. For those 33 years 2000 years ago, in the obscure corner of the Earth, people could:

- ✓ talk to Jesus,
- ✓ they could argue,
- ✓ they could react,

- ✓ they could adhere to what He said,
- ✓ or they could ignore Him and walk the other way.

This is what happened to those who met Him. But what about today, 2,000 years later? How can His wholly human Presence be encountered by the man of today, 2,000 years later?

To find an answer, let's look at Luke Chapter 10. In Luke 10, many wanted to see Jesus, to be healed by Him, to meet Him. Unable to visit all the towns and villages, Jesus began to send His closest followers to the places He could not reach. First, He sent the twelve He had chosen, and then seventy-two other disciples, in two's so they could tell people what had happened to them after they encountered Him. The disciples returned full of enthusiasm because:

- ✓ people listened to them,
- ✓ individuals believed,
- ✓ and lives were changed.

So, what kind of face did Jesus have for those who listened to, or put up with, the first two sent by Jesus to the first village? What did He look like to them? He had the face and appearance of those two disciples. For, as they set out, Jesus

had told them: “Anyone who listens to you listens to me” (Luke 10:16).

So even when Jesus was at the height of His earthly ministry, His identifiable form that was not merely His external, physical appearance. His identifiable form was also those who believed in Him; so much so that they were sent by Him to convey:

- ✓ His words
- ✓ His message
- ✓ His miracles, and
- ✓ His salvation.

This exact same approach is the method for “Jesus encounters” today. We are the seventy-two who can verify:

- ✓ whether His great claim is real or not,
- ✓ whether He is God or not,
- ✓ whether the Christian message is true or not.

I am talking about an encounter between a believer and an unbeliever.

- ✓ Historically speaking, this reality is called “church,”
- ✓ sociologically “the people of God,”
- ✓ and ontologically, in the profound sense of the word, the “Mystical Body of Christ,”

an expression which barely touching the depths of the question, but adds some clarity.

Saint Paul sensed this when, thrown from his horse, he heard a voice saying to him: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4). He did not even know Christ. He was persecuting people who believed in Christ. Out of the gate of Paul’s conversion, He understood that to persecute a member of the Church was to persecute Christ Himself. Take that a baby step further: to encounter a member of the Church was to encounter Christ Himself. This is why Paul could eventually teach as he did. “Though there are many of us we form a single body.” (1COR 10:17). It is in this very realistic way that we become members, one of the other (EPH 4:25).

To express this same reality, this evening’s/morning’s Gospel cites the characteristic Palestinian imagery of vines: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; but cut off from Me you can do nothing” (JN 15:5).

To encounter the Church, we must meet men and women in limited surroundings. It is impossible to encounter the universal Church in its entirety, for this is an abstract image.

Therefore, we meet the Church as it emerges locally, in the parish.

To encounter Jesus in His followers can be profoundly significant for somebody's soul, giving a meaning to and provoking a change in their life, and therefore, penetrating that person in exactly the same way as Jesus in His physical form did 2,000 years ago. One experienced Jesus, a Man people could:

- ✓ listen to,
- ✓ look at,
- ✓ touch with their hands,
- ✓ and let Him penetrate their very soul to live a new life,

like the woman at the well or the man born blind, or they could reject Him and walk away as did the rich young man and so many of the Jewish higher ups.

Where am I going with all this? Where I'm going is where I went, before the pandemic with ICNU "I See In You" moments, "I See in You" a need for Jesus Christ, whenever God provides these moments. Some of these moments may be the unbeliever coming to you, a believer, because "they see in you" something they don't have. (guy in confession, Terry)

However, the slant comes from a different angle as we are in the midst of a pandemic. Because what I look at on the internet tends to revolve around the Church, my Google feed sends me articles about you, Churchgoers.

One article reads:

Typically people who are active in faith communities tend to have higher levels of well-being and we find that to be the case even during the pandemic. Some are doing better, some worse, and we're trying to look at the different factors affecting that.

Many of the survey respondents included the people who are most active in faith communities, those who are involved in volunteer programs or other ministries.

The respondents don't represent your average American, but they do represent your average churchgoer.

A second article reads:

A new study has found that mental health remained stable for people who attended church frequently this year. While the mental health impact of the pandemic has been a source of concern for many people, the Gallup Poll found that Americans who went to church frequently were more likely to say their mental health this year was "excellent."

SML's parish council is discussing whether or not parishioners will return to Mass after the pandemic is over. So the Lord put in my Google feed this last article I'll share:

Two-thirds of pastors whose churches were open for in-person worship in January saw attendance of less than 70% of their January 2020 attendance. Many of these pastors are wondering if those who haven't returned ever will. Nine in 10 churchgoers plan to when it is safe to do so. A study of 1,000 in the U.S. found, when COVID-19 is no longer an active threat to people's health, 91% plan to attend in-person worship services at least as often as they did before the coronavirus pandemic. That includes almost a quarter (23%) who plan to attend more than they did previously. The other 9% said they'd continue virtually.

So if someone were to encounter Christ through you or through me, what would we say? Take the answer from Matthew:

Do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say. You will be given at that moment what you are to say. (10:19)

Do not sell yourself short to be the person Our Lord has chosen for another to encounter Him, and you may not see anything immediate come from your encounter. In my Office this past week, I read the eulogy of St. Peter Chanel, whose feast day was on Wednesday. It read:

Quietly Peter preached Christ and the Gospel, but there was little response. Still with invincible perseverance he pursued his missionary task on both the human and religious level, relying on the example and words of Christ, "There is one who sows and another who reaps."

We can take the same lesson from the sower of the seed.

"Not knowing how it happens, the seed grows, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear." (MK 4:28)

Why? Because according to just these three articles, those of us who are sticking close to the Church are doing better than those who are not.