

21st Sunday of Ordinary Time

Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi and he asked his disciples,

"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter said in reply, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus said to him in reply, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah.

For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.

And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church,
and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.

I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven;

and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Then he strictly ordered his disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

Mt 16:13-20

Something was bothering the people in the region of Caesarea Philippi. Why else would the list of Jesus' alleged true identities consist of people who had only one thing in common? They all were calling Israel to conversion. The list is quite telling: it starts with the prophets, famously unpopular among their contemporaries for calling them to turn away from their sins; through Jeremiah, the prophet of the exile and persistent critic of the corruption of Israel; through Elijah, the firebrand prophet condemning the lack of faith in his nation; ending finally with John the Baptist, the greatest of them all. There is no King David or King Solomon on the list, no Judah Maccabee, no national heroes, no military leaders, no writers or wise men. Something was bothering the people of Israel. I hope I am not over-psychologizing their motives or projecting my own emotions, but it seems like the Israelites were longing for God. They just couldn't recognize him.

Simon Peter is clearly different. We don't know exactly why he saw much more in Jesus or what this much more was. We have no reason to think that Simon had some magical gift or some strange capability to detect holiness. What we know is that his answer expresses the deepest hope of every human soul. "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." This answer must have been very difficult for Simon. It is a profession of faith, which is more than to pronounce the outcome of some biblical-historical analysis or to express a well-meaning naïve conviction. To say "You are the Christ, the son of the living God" means to entrust myself to God. It means to realize that the son of God is present here, and that nothing is or ever will be more important. It also means that God is longing for me, and I long for his healing. "You are the Christ, the son of the living God" signifies complete surrender and abandonment to God's love. How easy would it be to say it? How willing would you be to even think those words, if you knew their actual meaning?

What is most surprising in this scene is the fact that Peter was not wrong. With the endlessly low probability that the answer he gave would actually be real, the correctness of his words becomes even more striking. "The flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father." Somehow, in his always surprising ability to be completely honest, Peter saw the

Divine. He saw the face of the Father in Jesus Christ. According to the Old Testament, you cannot see God and remain the same. "I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church."

The people of the region of Caesarea Philippi were bothered by something. They were longing to meet God but they could not recognize him. They thought Jesus was just another prophet, calling them to conversion. It seems like something is bothering us too. When we listen to our Lord's response to Peter's profession of faith, we cannot help but ask questions. "Can you trust Peter?" "Maybe he was just lucky?" "Is it wise to build the future of your whole mission on one event?" "How prudent is it to entrust the priceless connection between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of man to mere humans -- they will fail, you know?" "And even if all goes well, will they be able to protect the purity of the Father's face?" There are many, many more questions than these and we want to ask them because something is bothering us. The possibility of betrayal seems to us more certain than the possibility of holiness and that makes us uncomfortable. True holiness will never force itself on us so we have to decide. Do I believe or not? The tension is almost unbearable. We seem to be ready to sacrifice holiness, in even the greatest of our ancestors, just because it feels somehow safer than to attempt to fully understand their decisions. We seem to be ready to erase the past because we discover that both we and the ancestors are sinners. We feel somehow more secure in disappointment than in hope. But it still bothers us: what if we are wrong after all? What if the kingdom of heaven can be open to sinners? The possibility that the Holy One could be Present among us becomes almost exhausting.

This Gospel does not have the final word. For some mysterious reasons, Jesus orders the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. Why? Because God, who in his humility became man, understands how deep and how important our questions are to us. He knows that those questions about holiness cannot be simply answered by a homily, even the greatest. Those questions require a radical change of the whole person because the answer to them radically changes the horizon of life. God, on his part, will answer. He will answer in the moment when he offers his son completely to us on the cross, and at the same time, when the son offers humanity completely to God. The son of God becomes a gift to us. When we recognize the gift, when we make an act of faith in Him, the great bond is created between God and man. This bond cannot be broken by any doubt or sin. The promise given to Peter by Jesus is not an act of emotional naivety in the heat of the moment, but a revelation of God's love that had been waiting for us to decide to believe. Because of the purity of Christ's surrender to the Father on the cross, no impurity of man can disfigure the face of the loving Father in the hearts of those who believe in his son. Those who remain united with Peter in his surprising profession of faith will remain united with Christ's promise. "The gates of the netherworld will never prevail" against the kingdom of heaven.