Fr. Curtis Miller   August 22-23, 2020 Homily for the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Some of you might remember one of our former bishops here in the Diocese of Burlington, Bishop John Marshall. He was our bishop for two decades before he moved on to become the bishop of Springfield, Massachusetts in the early '90s. Sadly, he was afflicted with cancer and died only two years after leaving Vermont. When his family was going through his papers after his death, they came across a manuscript of his personal meditations. In it, Bishop Marshall had gone through the Gospels and written down all the questions that Jesus asked, from the most seemingly trivial to the most important, and he wrote out his own reflections and answers to Jesus' questions. These writings were later published as a book, *But Who Do You Say I Am?*

If that title sounds familiar, it should. We just heard Jesus ask this question in today's Gospel reading. Bishop Marshall's book reflects on this question, as well as the one preceding it: "Who do people say that I am?" Bishop Marshall considers how the disciples answer this first question evasively by referring to every other prophet, except Jesus Himself. The bishop observes that "people are always looking for a 'prophet,' one who will relieve them of the responsibility for their own lives; one whom they can follow blindly, [but] those are not the kind of prophets that God gives us." Instead, God wants us to use our intelligence to discern what is right and true.

Setting aside the bishop's book for a minute: Isn't this one of the problems we see in politics today? All too often, we just want some charismatic leader—of either political party—to take charge and fix everything, so that we don't have to think too much about it. But if we are looking to political candidates as our prophets and saviors, we're looking in the wrong place. Only Christ is our Savior. Instead of just blindly following the crowd, we as Christians must step up and challenge our political leaders—on both sides of the aisle—to better live out what know is true and moral.

Returning to Bishop Marshall's book, he next turns to Jesus' second question: "But Who do *you* say I am?" Bishop Marshall writes, "This is the question for all ages to answer. How each of us responds should set the context for our lives. If we answer with Peter, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God,' we should recognize that Jesus must be central in our lives."

When considering these questions of Jesus ourselves, it can help us to consider some background and the setting of this scene in the Gospels. Caesarea Philippi was a city named in honor of the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus. It featured a temple dedicated to the emperor as a god, along with temples for other pagan gods. While it might seem strange to dedicate a temple to a living person, Augustus was hailed as a god even during his lifetime, with such divine titles as "son of god," "lord," and "prince of peace." Even his name, Augustus, meant "highness," "exalted one," as in our modern word "august." This very month, August, is named in his honor. This nephew and

successor of Julius Caesar brought peace to the Roman world by defeating all the rival factions that had erupted in the wake of Caesar's assassination. People thought highly of him, or at least were wise enough to fear him, and so they flattered him with divine titles.

Imagine this backdrop of lavish, imposing temples, resplendent with the imperial power of Rome, and the impressive statues of Augustus, a living god. Now imagine Jesus, walking by in His humble, threadbare tunic, followed by the little crowd of His disciples, suddenly turning and asking them, "Who do people say that I am?" In this setting, surrounded by so many figures claiming to be a divine savior, it's understandable that the disciples were reluctant to answer directly. They hem and haw, saying that some people think that He is one of the ancient prophets, returned from the dead.

But then Jesus addresses them (and us) directly: "But Who do *you* say that I am?" It's Simon who answers right away, "You are the Christ, the Son of God!" Jesus praises him for his bold faith, giving him a new name, "Peter," meaning "rock" for the solidity of his faith. It was not his own human insight that led Peter to this profession of faith in Christ; it had been revealed to him by God. And despite Peter's continued human weakness and sinfulness, he continued to possess that gift of being attentive to God's voice in his heart, and then boldly teaching the truths that God had revealed to him.

Peter became the first pope, and by a special grace of God, his gift for authoritatively teaching the truth has been passed down to each pope, right down to Pope Francis today. That's why Catholics care so much about the pope and what he says. Particularly when he is teaching authoritatively, the pope is not just sharing his own human insights, but he is speaking truths as he is inspired by God. That is why Peter and his successors as pope are the rock of the Church: they give us solid ground to know with certainty the truths we are to believe, so that we are not each left to figure out everything on our own, and break up into disagreeing factions, as we see in so many other churches.

Now, just like St. Peter, all the popes since have been human beings, with human weaknesses and sins. When Jesus was arrested, Peter fearfully denied even knowing him, but he repented after Jesus' resurrection. Sadly, we've seen some immoral popes throughout the Church's history. But even the worst of them were preserved from God from teaching falsely about our Faith. It's important for us to pray for the pope, so that God will uphold him in the face of so many pressures, and so that he might always teach the faith in word and action.

Let us pray also for ourselves. May we never think of ourselves or anyone else as our god and savior. Instead, let us be like Peter and boldly profess our faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, our Savior, and may we always witness to this faith by what we say and by how we live our lives.