

HOMILY SUNDAY 21 – A

“Who Do You Say I Am?”

(Isaiah 22:15, 19-23; Psalm 138; Romans 11:33-36; Matthew 16:13-20)

Moses and Jesus were golfing one day. It turns out that Jesus was a great fan of Tiger Woods. Every time he made a good shot, Jesus would exclaim “Wow – just like Tiger Woods!” and every time he made a poor shot, Jesus would complain, “Oh, if only I could shoot like Tiger Woods.” This went on and on to the point that Moses was getting a bit tired of it all. Then Jesus hit a ball over a pond of water into the rough. Moses asked him if he should part the waters for him to get his ball. Jesus replied no, he would walk over and get it himself, and proceeded to walk on the water towards his ball. Another golfer came along, noticed Jesus walking on the water and said to Moses, “Who does that guy think he is, Jesus Christ?” Moses replied, “No, Tiger Woods!”

Do you remember the answer to the old catechism question “Why were we created?” The answer, of course, is to know, love and serve God. That is a very solid theological statement.

Today, the gospel provides us with more good theology. We are invited to know, love and serve Jesus, to be Church and to build up the reign of God here on earth.

Jesus poses two questions to the disciples in the gospel today, “Who do people say I am?” and “Who do you say that I am?” Those two questions are as relevant as ever. Almost every year Time magazine will run a feature on the identity of Jesus as many people continue to struggle with the mystery of the Christ. This gospel has many implications for us in terms of faith, being the Church and salvation. Let us examine this gospel more closely.

It is noteworthy that the setting is Caesarea Philippi. While the orthodox leaders plotted to kill Jesus as a heretic, he stands with the twelve apostles in the midst of the ruins and splendor of the gods and religion of Greece and the Caesar worship of Rome where the history of Israel found a focus. Here in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks those who follow him who they believe him to be and expects an answer. It is as if Jesus deliberately set himself against the background of the world’s religions in all their history and their splendor and demanded to be compared with them and to have the verdict given in his favor.

There are few scenes in the Bible where the consciousness of Jesus in his own divinity and in his entirely unique relationship with the Father as Son of God shines out with a more dazzling light. In addition, as Messiah he is the anointed, the suffering servant of Isaiah, who will bring about a new creation through his passion, death and resurrection.

Peter's inspired answer to Jesus' question highlights his unique and fundamental role. It is more about Jesus' faith in him than his faith in Jesus. Jesus shows that the eschatological community of the end-times has its beginnings here on earth as an organized society whose leader he now appoints.

Peter is here paralleled to Abraham. Just as Abram stood at the beginning of the people of God, had his name changed, and was called a rock, so also Peter stands at the beginning of a new people of God and receives the Abrahamic name "rock." Christ builds the Church on human leadership, weak and limited as it may be.

Peter is given the keys to the kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is the bottom line, the basic reality that Jesus came to initiate and to establish here on earth. This is a mind-boggling development that we can never fathom deeply enough. Through the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, the overwhelming gracious love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit begins the reign of God here on earth. The peace, joy, right relationship and intimacy of the Blessed Trinity begins in us and among us. That mystery prompted me as a new archbishop to choose *Regnum Dei Intra Vos* as my motto which means "The Kingdom of heaven is among you, within you."

It is upon faith in Jesus as Messiah that the group that Jesus has formed will endure. As long as this faith endures, the gates of Sheol will have no power over them. What began with Peter was the new fellowship of all believers in Jesus, not identified with any particular Church and not limited to any, but embracing all who love the Lord.

The task of the Church is to be the new Israel and to help realize the Kingdom of God here on earth. As a visible body, a *qahal* in Hebrew and an *ecclesia* in Greek, a people "called together," the Church must rescue the elect from death's dominion and lead them into the Kingdom of Heaven.

In a sense, we're all given keys to the kingdom of heaven. All of us open and close doors. All of us bind and loose. All of us have within ourselves the potential to open certain doors and to close others, to bind wounds, to loose from fear and guilt, to invite others to share the feast that we have already begun to taste. Given all this, our main work as members of the Church is to be reconcilers. We must be about helping people be reconciled with one another through humble honesty, truthful apologies, compassionate understanding and forgiveness of one another.

As you can see, this gospel is a rich review of who is Jesus, the role of Peter, the nature of the Church and the beginnings of the Kingdom of Heaven among us. In theological language, the gospel is a short course on Christology, Ecclesiology and Soteriology, all flowing from the question of Jesus and the answer given by St. Peter.

We must all answer the question of the identity of Jesus for ourselves. Over the years my answer has developed and grown. My first spiritual director taught me about the two-fold mission of Jesus to redeem and sanctify. That helped me see Jesus as redeemer and as a healer who walks us through our pain to touch and heal our wounds and memories..

Later, the Marriage Encounter movement helped me to see Jesus as the love of the Father made flesh and to see the Blessed Trinity as relationship and as intimacy.

Journeying with victims of abuse on their healing journeys helped me to see Jesus as forgiveness personified, as the one who would help us forgive those who abused us. Addictions awareness work has helped me to see Jesus as one who is truly free from compulsion, one who has no addiction in him. Working with the aboriginal people for over thirty years has helped me to see Jesus as The medicine Man; The Sun Dancer; The Pipe Holder and The King Tree of the Sun Dance lodge. My own more recent experience of Jesus after I was named archbishop was to see him as the one who can truly set us free from fear.

Over the years, my prayer life has reflected my experience of Jesus and led me to pray this prayer to him each morning: “Lord Jesus, totally receptive to the Father’s love, humble, pure and faithful in response to that love, Son of God, Son of Man, Son of David, Savior, Redeemer, free from addiction, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Resurrection, suffering servant, crucified Messiah, sacrificial victim, Risen Lord, victorious King.” That, in essence, is my answer to who Jesus is for me. I invite you to come up with your own prayer that includes within it who Jesus is for you.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is in itself an experience of Jesus. We receive his forgiveness, we listen to his Word and we are nourished by his Body and Blood. Our worship in spirit and truth transforms us into his Body, the new people of God, the new Israel. We are then sent out to serve him and to continue to build up the Kingdom of God here on earth.

So today, in the light of this powerful gospel story, let us resolve to know, love and serve Jesus who forms us into his Body, his Church, and sends us out to build up the reign of God among us. May God bless us all.