

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

“And you,” Jesus went on to ask, “who do you say I am?” In reply, Peter said: “You are the Christ, the Messiah!”...He began to teach them that the Son of Man had to suffer much, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, be put to death and rise three days later...Peter then took him aside and began to remonstrate with him, but Jesus reprimanded him: “Get out of my sight, you satan! You are not judging by God’s standards...”

Mark 8, 27-35



If we are courageous enough to engage with today’s gospel-reading as participants rather than as ide-line observers, we, too, will have to answer the very question that Jesus put to his disciples: “And you, who do you say I am?” And if other people want to find out who we really are, all they have to do is to carefully observe what we do and say in the course of a couple of weeks to see if our actions match what we say and are in harmony with the standards we claim to uphold. You and I claim to do our best to live our lives in accord with the values that Jesus lived and proclaimed. Those who know us will see whether or not we are making genuine efforts in accord with the Gospel to which we say we have pinned our colours. Others will soon be able to conclude whether or not we are the genuine article, whether we are frauds or faithful disciples of Jesus. They don’t expect us to be perfect, but they will soon see if we are making a genuine effort to live what we proclaim.

Jesus’ disciples had been given ample opportunity to closely observe his words and actions. Accordingly, Jesus took the risk of asking them the conclusions they had reached about him. On their behalf, Peter voiced a magnificent reply, but one that was incomplete because he had not fully appreciated there would be consequences for Jesus if he continued to live his life with full integrity - he would make enemies of those who were in positions of power and those enemies would want to eliminate him. When Jesus informed his disciples of that, Peter was so taken aback that he missed the point about Jesus’ prediction that he would rise from the grave.

The implication of Jesus’ revelation that he would fall foul of those in power, of those who were threatened by the values he espoused, is that a similar fate would come the way of anyone who chose to imitate him. Peter was not ready to hear what Jesus had said, and tried to silence his friend. I can just imagine this man, in keeping with the impetuosity we have come to associate with him, saying something like: “Cut it out, Jesus, we’ll never attract anyone else if you continue to say things like that. That’s not good publicity.” And Jesus was equal to Peter’s efforts to shut him up: “Steady up, Peter, you’ve missed my point. Can’t you see what I’m trying to tell you?”

This raises for me the topic of the relationship between Jesus and Peter. I suggest it’s worth delving into because, while we all claim to have valued friends, we have to ask ourselves if we trust them enough to allow them to tell us truths that might shake us up a bit. In John’s Gospel there are at least three references to John as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13, 23; 19, 26; 21, 7;), yet most of the arguments in the Gospels are between Jesus and Peter. To me, that is evidence that the relationship of friendship between Jesus and Peter was strong enough to sustain disagreements. I am reminded here of a definition of friendship I came across in the *Christian Century* magazine about 20 years ago: “Friends are those whom God chooses to teach us what our families can’t.” True friends are people who are prepared to challenge us to grow and change, by telling us home

truths. Love involves caring enough to risk asking hard questions or confronting us when we behave irresponsibly. We sometimes hear ourselves saying that so-and-so is someone who will listen to us without judging us. But let's not forget that there is a difference between unconditional listening and unconditional love. I find it interesting that libraries are full of books about relationships between marriage partners, about parenting and family relationships, but light on when it comes to exploring the nature of healthy friendship. Yet it's often a challenge from an honest friend that reminds us that we are loved.

So, as I take heart from Mark's account of the vigorous exchange between Peter and Jesus, my sympathies are with Peter, who seemed to humbly absorb the rebuke he received. The friendship between these two was sufficiently robust to encourage Jesus to put his confidence in Peter to lead that first group of disciples who would eventually grow into the Church. But let's not forget that, among all those faithful Jews who longed for the coming of the Messiah, there would not have been a single one who would have envisioned a Messiah who was destined for rejection, suffering and death. It has been only in retrospect that humanity has come to realise that champions of justice and advocates for the poor and marginalised will be eliminated by those who will stop at nothing when their own status and power are threatened.

Peter and the other disciples with him, like the deaf man whose ears Jesus had just opened, had their hearing jolted by a message they least expected. What's more it took time for that message to register in their consciousness. It took time for them to realise that following in the footsteps of Jesus would bring them rejection, persecution and death.

Today's readings from Isaiah and James prepare us for the shock message of the gospel-reading. Isaiah describes how listening to God's word is like a wake-up call, but holding firm to it brings trouble from those who cannot accept what God expects of them: "God has given me a well-taught tongue, so I know how to encourage tired people...God opened my ears and I didn't go back to sleep...I followed orders, stood there and took it on the chin when they beat me...I didn't dodge their insults, faced them as they spat in my face. And God stayed right there and helped me, so I was not disgraced" (Isaiah 50, 4-9).

The reading from James complements Isaiah's testimony. James points out that it's not enough for us to proclaim that we are committing ourselves to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. We have to match our words with practical action: "God-talk", says James, "without God-acts is outrageous nonsense" (James 2 17). But, even in our own day, we have seen how siding with the poor and assisting them to claim their own voice and independence are anathema to those whose power is built on keeping the masses in subservience. Oscar Romero's assassination is testimony to that, as is the disappearance of priests in Nicaragua who dared to walk beside oppressed villagers, addressing their basic needs and empowering them with education.

And what's the implication for us here? We would do well to note that Peter was a great example of inconsistency and betrayal, that James and John, the sons of Zebedee, had their eyes on positions of status and power, that Thomas didn't believe his friends when they declared they had seen the Risen Jesus. Yet Jesus stuck with them all despite their human frailties, as he sticks with us, despite ours. Yet, we all know people, even family members, who have walked away from the Church because some in leadership have failed to live up to the trust we placed in them. And we may be tempted to follow them. However, we're all in this together, so isn't it time for us to stand up and be counted? Who do we say Jesus is? Do our actions match our answer? If they do, the road ahead will not be easy.