

Isaiah 22:19-23

Psalms 138

Romans 11:33-36

Matthew 16:13-20

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Questions are important in our lives. They, of course, enable learning. Sometimes our days seem to be filled with questions – questions we ask of others; questions others ask of us; and questions we ask of ourselves. Many of these questions are routine. What time is it? How are you? What's for supper? Where did I leave my phone? Some questions are signs of the times. Where is your mask? Does that restaurant have comfortable outdoor seating? Or, in a more serious vein: How severe are your symptoms? or Will we ever achieve racial justice? Some questions challenge us to make commitments. Where are you going to school? What do I want to do with my life? Will you marry me? Some questions probe for answers that are neither superficial nor trite. Whenever my father asked, "What are you up to?" I knew better than to answer, "Not much." or even worse, "About five-foot-ten." "What are you up to?" meant he sensed something was going on, a problem or a potential problem, and it was in my best interest to come clean. The questions that Jesus asks his disciples in today's Gospel are also probing for more than superficial answers. But rather than sensing problems, Jesus is stimulating thought, and he is looking for answers that have depth. Jesus begins his questions innocently enough, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" That first question is easy. It does not put any of the disciples on the spot. Jesus is simply asking what others are saying about him. From the responses, it is obvious that he is seen as a prophet and a teacher. But then,

Jesus gets more pointed and direct, "But who do you say that I am?" I suspect there were a few moments of uncomfortable silence as each of the disciples pondered an answer to that question. Finally, Simon Peter, the one who had a habit of vacillating between profound declarations of faith and putting his foot in his mouth, steps forward and answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus affirms Simon Peter's answer. He calls him blessed because this truth had been revealed to Simon Peter by the Father. He did not come up with it on his own. Jesus goes on to declare that Peter is the rock upon which he will build his church. He promises Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven. And he admonishes the disciples to tell no one that he is the Christ.

There is a lot to be unpacked in this short Gospel reading. It begins with Jesus taking his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, a walk of about twenty-five miles. Location is important in Holy Scripture just as it is in real estate. This city was built on a massive wall of rock that also supported a marble temple honoring Caesar, who considered himself a god. Over the years hundreds of people had carved niches into the rock and placed in them statues of their gods for worship. This was the setting that Jesus chose to ask his questions; to name another rock, Peter, as the foundation of his church; and to declare that the netherworld will not prevail against it. The disciples' response to Jesus' first question tells us that the people saw Jesus only as a prophet. But Peter's response to the second question boldly proclaims the divinity of Jesus. And in calling Jesus the Son of God at the very site of Caesar's temple, Peter debunks any notion of Caesar's divinity as well as the validity of his rule. Then, Jesus promises Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven, keys that would open doors of forgiveness.

The disciples had watched Jesus open doors to sinners and outcasts throughout his ministry, and now, through Peter, he is sharing that responsibility with them. The final admonition not to tell anyone that Jesus is the Christ echoes similar commands heard throughout the Gospels. The disciples will not be ready to preach the Good News until they have experienced the complete Gospel, including the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Only then does Jesus commission his disciples to go out to the ends of the earth, make disciples of all nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The pointed second question that Jesus asked his disciples he also asks of us, not just once, but over and over again throughout our lives, “But who do you say that I am?” It is the most important question that we will ever be asked, and it is not just about Jesus. It is also about us. Who am I? What do I believe? We answer that question not only with words, but also in our actions. It is one thing to say, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God?” But just saying it is not enough. We must live the answer – live it by taking up our cross, whatever burden that may be, and following Jesus. He shows us the way. It is a life-long journey of love, compassion, and forgiveness. It is a journey of inclusion. Remember, Jesus opens doors. He excludes no one. Instead, he mourns for those who exclude themselves by rejecting the gifts he offers.

Peter is an encouraging role model for us in our efforts to know and to follow Jesus. Like us, Peter did not always get it right. But his faith kept bringing him back. The rock upon which Jesus built his church was not the person of Peter, but the faith that

Peter expressed in his testimony. Our Church is founded on Peter’s faith.

Today’s second reading from the letter of Saint Paul to the Romans deserves some special attention. This reading has no clear connection to either the first reading or the Gospel. It is a hymn of praise that Paul wrote after a time of distress when he came to realize that all he had left was his trust in God. In these few words, Paul expresses awe for the wisdom and knowledge of God which goes far beyond anything that our human minds can even imagine. In this reading, Paul warns against two common pitfalls. The first is to think that we know what is on God’s mind and that we can influence God with advice. The second is to think that God owes us for the good we have done. To help us avoid these pitfalls, Paul reminds us that all things come from God and through God and exist for God. As baffling as God’s ways may seem at times, we must recognize that they always work for the good of all. And if we can truly accept that, we may learn once and for all to place our trust in God first, and not as a last resort.