

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 16

August 23, 2020

Year A RCL

Isaiah 51:1-6; Psalm 138; Matthew 16:13-20

“But who do you say that I am?”

By: The Rev. Fr. Fabian Villalobos

Jesus in today’s gospel asks a question to his disciples that reveals his identity and defines his mission. The question is so powerful that we also are compelled to answer in our own relationship with God.

“But who do you say that I am?”

What others say about Jesus is important and necessary to hear, but the relationship with Jesus is personal and exceptional. To answer Jesus’ query, a person needs to experience the Messiah’s qualities and have a loving union and communion with Him. It is impossible to know, love, serve, and experience the living God only occasionally or as an abstract idea. The disciples had been chosen and called to walk day by day with Jesus, they had

experienced the Savior's human and divine characteristics, and now in the revelation process, they are asked to define who is Jesus for them.

“But who do you say that I am?”

There is not a wrong answer if a person is in God. The gospel narratives placed this question to facilitate the understanding that a person has about Jesus. And only those who have spent time with Him and had witnessed his redemptive love will be able to answer this question. What we say or speak about Jesus is important, however it is more important how we live our relationship with Him as our Savior, King and Lord.

The question about Jesus identity happened when Jesus and his disciples came into the district of Caesarea Philippi. This city was built in memory of the Greek god, Paneas, one of the many pagan's gods. And later under the Roman occupation, Phillip II named it to honor the Emperor Caesar Augustus. It is under the Roman domination of the territory of Israel that Peter declares Jesus as Messiah, Son of the living God.

“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”

The answer is praised and recognized out of Peter's human capacities. The author of excellence and perfection is only God, and the Father allows Peter to

recognize and declare Jesus mission as the Messiah and to declare that He is Son of the living God.

After Peter's confession, Jesus changed Peter's name and committed him to a deeper and more mature relationship of discipleship.

The same happens when we answer the question,

"But who do you say that I am?"

In Peter's case Jesus told him, "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church" Peter is unaware and strange to the full meaning this declaration has for the future. Especially because Peter is the same disciple who later in Jesus passion denies knowing him. It seems that this "rock" is a human and sinner as you and I are, and the working grace of God is what makes it possible for Peter and for us to be more like God.

These verses of the scripture about building Jesus' church upon the "rock" had been studied and commented incessantly over the centuries to the point of defining two different types of ecclesiology and Christology, one who sees Peter as indispensable and necessary authority and overseer of the disciples; and the other that sees John the beloved disciple that offers the heart and love to have a genuine relationship with Jesus. Today most scholars will agree that

Peter and John are necessary and complement each other like Martha and Mary.

More than take sides on the theological dispute. I would like to underline that even to Peter, Jesus mentioned with a possessive that, "He will build His church." The maker and creator of the church is Jesus, we are the body as his people and precious possession, Jesus is the head, the artisan and complement of the church. The Pauline theology talks of Jesus as the one who sustains and gives life to the church.

When we answer the question, "But who do you say that I am," it is important to understand that we are part of His church, that Jesus being Son of the living God never fails to offer His life and love to us.

In this time of pandemic when our society and whole world look as if it was upside down, many had asked where is God? How a loving God allows so much sufferance and pain in the world? Before asking each one of us in first person, we need to answer, "But who do you say that I am?" If we really know about God, we will accept that the mystery of His power is beyond our explanation and control. We trust that the living God continually cares and loves His church and His people.

Each one as member of the church of Jesus is a living stone that through the participation in the ministries of the church and daily life, is capable by the grace of God to declare Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Amen.