

St Pius-St Anthony 21st Sunday Ordinary Time Year A

There is a pop song I hear echoed behind today's gospel, the lyrics say 'Come a little closer' (anyone knows can tell me name and artist, I don't know). Jesus is saying that. Inviting His disciples one layer nearer, to the mystery of God's plan in sending his Son to save the world. That is comes down to knowing him, trusting him. But who is He?

Jesus begins by asking non-threateningly enough, "Who do people say the 'Son of Man' is"? Basically, just what do people in the streets say about my ministry? If you are like me, I want to add, "Hold on a minute, Jesus, what does 'Son of Man' even refer to?" This is an unique title (maybe a code for the enlightened), that Jesus uses to humbly address or speak about himself. Scripturally, the title is used in an old school way by Ezekiel written as far back as BC 580, to just mean, 'human' 'mortal' (having human parents. It was a way of admitting finite limitation, like saying, 'I put on my shoes every morning just like you'. But since the prophet Daniel (chp 7 written around just 160 years before Jesus shows up), it became loaded with more messianic overtones the phrase suggested great hope, like 'what's coming next' 'son of humanity', looking forward to a future redeemed condition of man (like a next generation human or 2.0 human). So Jesus' use of it, loads on to that increasing hopeful expectation of better conditions to come. Here are a few of his other references to it: Luke 19:10 "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost." Or Matthew 12:8 "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." Jesus is amping up the religious expectations of the loaded title, 'Son of Man'. (In that same chapter, Jesus says about his ministry "There is something greater than the temple is here (Mt 12:6) . And "There is something greater than Solomon here" (Mt 12:42).

But is Jesus really concerned about the talk on the street? I think He only asked that casual question, to move gently into the more personal/intimate question of His own, ""Who do you say that I am?" Now, this is personal. At this point, He is asking his apostles, "What do I mean to you?" Who am I to you? This is defining moment of a relationship. One of those, 'Sit down, this may take a minute' talks, that changes everything afterward based on what you say. But, Peter rises to the moment to share his heart, "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*" No more piddling coy titles like 'Son of Man'. No, Peter just said 'you are the One, the Life-giving God among us'.

And Jesus not only accepts that, but sanctions it by adding, 'Peter you didn't come up with that on your own-that is divine inspiration- aware of it or not, you received that from the Father.' And not stopping there, Jesus adds layers building on Peter's insight, to interpret Peter's own Name to him. Peter is not just a personal title, but now an institutional bedrock. Jesus says, "Peter I will build my people (church= assembly=flock) upon you." I hear Jesus responding with that, like when a person knows they have the resources to get something done, and they say, "I can build on that" or, "I can work with that!" I love how we kept that play on a word Jesus introduces about Peters' faith being rock solid, when we say things in English today like 'petrified wood', being wood compressed into a stone rock, or person being 'petrified', when they are scared stiff! So Jesus celebrates, commends, vindicates Peter's firm faith as the ideal for his followers. Jesus is saying, "You hold that belief tight, keep that conviction and we can do anything!" The gates of netherworld-death undoing- can never overtake it. What we

do with such faith will live, the greatest of mileage. Remain forever! And this is where the keys idea come in. Jesus means "Faith that knows me as Savior, and trusts me as Savior, will open all doors-always find a way!"

And here is some so neat a background to this whole story! Jesus asks these questions about identity, and building what lasts forever, where? Where does all this happen? In 'Caesarea Philippi'- a city filled with stone monuments of human pride: not just a temple with a mere man's name on it, but a whole city named to celebrate and feed the pride or fluff the ego of a leader. Caesarea (honoring the emperor) and Philippi (honoring the son of Herod the Great-Philip)! So Jesus took that specific place and occasion to teach humility and true greatness to His apostles. There is not any nobility in having stuff named after you (we see that! How easily such monuments are 'cancelled') Jesus doesn't want his followers to construct monuments or egotistical displays of conceit, but He wants built, the interpersonal connections among his people ('Upon you and your faith, Peter, I will build my people!') Jesus is assembling the life-giving network of faithful believing disciples serving the living God who is imaged in the soul of each other human person-The Church). Now we are talking. Let's think for a minute: Jesus our Lord, what monument did he ever build? What did He flash His name up on? Or what memorial did He construct? Oh, it is closer then we might think. In fact, we are in the middle of it now: the Holy Eucharist. The celebration of Jesus' Name begins whenever another member is added to His People, and His name is imprinted on each of us, at our baptism. 'Christian': we bear His name on our soul. And how about this mass where we recall and memorialize His life death and resurrection. This is monument. His Memorial. This is what He said of our gathering here now: 'Do this in memory of me'. This life-giving moment of prayer together, feeding, nurturing and building up what Jesus Himself started. We are part of this; What Jesus builds.

Interestingly, with Peter answering Jesus about who Jesus is, Jesus reveals who Peter truly is. And Jesus does that for each of us. Which leads us to the simple message today of Jesus asking us- members of His church that he built from Peter's proclamation of faith. Jesus asks, "Who am I to you? Describe Me." As part of His Church-Assembly-People, we all need to answer Him. What do we say? Who is Jesus to us?