

[Isaiah 50:4c-9a; Ps. 116; James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35]

Once again, our country has been hit with another hurricane, this one named Florence. What has amazed me this time is the extreme organization of first responders, electrical linemen, and carpenters from all over the country who gathered ahead of the hurricane's arrival to be ready to go into action.

This is Catechetical Sunday, a time to remind parents and faith formation teachers about their proper roles in the religious, spiritual and Catholic formation of their children. We might take a moment to distinguish between catechesis and religious education. Catechesis is the work of preparing a person for a full and sincere relationship with Jesus Christ. Religious education, on the other hand, refers to the more general instruction in our religious tradition and practice. It's the difference between knowing Jesus Christ, and knowing about Him. Today, we celebrate the relationship and the process of faith formation.

I used to teach Bible study according to the "facts": who wrote a particular work and when (as far as we know), why it was written, and what it says about then and now. While I still believe those ideas are important to approaching a text with understanding, I now base many Bible lessons on the people in the stories and not just on the ideas.

Human beings enter into relationships with other human beings more naturally than they do with concepts and ideals. Soldiers in a war typically die for their buddies, not for principles. So, too, parents make great sacrifices for their children with faces and names and personal histories more readily than they do with abstract ideas. The story that moves us most powerfully is not about "freedom" or "poverty," but about that woman wearing a burka holding up a finger purpled at the voting booth, or that small boy struggling to make it to the Red Cross refugee camp before he dies.

Every year, a theme is developed for us to reflect upon. This year's theme is "Enlisting Witnesses for Jesus Christ." It ties in with Archbishop Vigneron's call in his pastoral letter, "Unleash the Gospel" to Encounter, Accompany and Witness the Gospel by our choices and by our actions.

Today's readings echo that theme. In today's Gospel, Jesus Christ asks you and me one of the most important questions we will ever face: "Who do YOU say that I am?" Who IS Jesus Christ for you?

Fr. Ed Beck is a Passionist priest who coordinated the weekly Sunday Mass out of New York. He is a handsome man, with prematurely white hair, and steel gray-blue eyes. One day, while travelling the subway from his office to his parish, a stranger kept staring at him and then finally approached him. He shouted, "You're HIM! You're HIM!"

The stranger frantically searched for a pen and paper and said, "I need your autograph, man!" Fr. Beck, not accustomed to this attention replied, "Well, I don't usually do this, but OK." He signed the small piece of paper, "Fr. Ed Beck, CP." The stranger looked at the piece of paper and said, "Fr. Ed Beck? Who's that? I thought you were Anderson Cooper!"

The stranger did not know who Fr. Ed Beck was. Do we know who Jesus Christ is? Is He the Son of God, our Lord, our Savior, the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, the King of Kings, Emmanuel, the Lamb of God?

Or do we expect Jesus to be our personal miracle worker? Mr. Fix It? Santa Claus, who brings us what we want instead of what we truly need? How about a revolutionary, a prophet, a political leader, a superhero? Jesus says that He will suffer greatly, be rejected by His own Jewish leaders, and be killed. But then He adds five important words: "and rise after three days." And those five words would make all the difference in the world, and in eternity. "And rise?"

Peter, at that time, doesn't get it. He is looking for profit, not persecution, winning not losing, success, not failure. But the message of Jesus is different. Take up your cross. Follow Me. Lose your life for the sake of My eternal life. Suffering through our life's work, our homework, our church work gets us there. Are YOU ready to do this? Do YOU have what it takes to be a "joyful, missionary disciple?" You do if you accompany us on the mission of Jesus.

Like the thousands of first responders, electrical linemen, and carpenters from all over the country, we are ready for combat, ready for action, ready to fight for our faith, our community, and our Church.

In our Second Reading, St. James puts it this way: “Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works.” In other words, do you have the courage, the guts, to witness to your faith with the people God puts around you – your family, your classmates, your co-workers, and your friends?

As a religious educator, I love learning and believe wholeheartedly in its value to the person of faith. But as a catechist, I know in my heart that learning about Jesus is never enough. If we don't encounter the God Who loves us, the Jesus Who saves, the Spirit Who inspires, then the sum total of our faith remains stuff we've memorized and accept based on the word of others.

“You are the Christ,” we'll say, and go about our business without thought for the sister who has no food for the day, or the brother who has no place to sleep. Once we vitally encounter Jesus the Crucified and Risen One, Who is teacher and healer and Lord and savior, everything changes. Everything has to.

To follow Jesus involves self-denial. Dear parents, catechists, confirmation candidates: What crosses do you take up? What do you “lose” for the sake of Christ and the Gospel? What good works bring your faith to life? Isaiah's Suffering Servant accepts his calling even in the face of ridicule and persecution. When have you felt God holding you up in your vocation? How do you stay true to your faith when others ridicule it?

So, who is Jesus Christ for YOU? What is Jesus asking you and your household to do? You are loved and you are needed! Enlist to become a witness to Christ! Encounter. Accompany. Witness. AMEN!