



Silver and Golden and Silver Jubilees + One Celebrations

Homily
“Missa Pro Populo”
Sunday, September 12, 2021
The Cathedral of St. Peter

“WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”

Dear Sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ:

Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”
Peter said to Him in reply,
“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!”

Who do you say that Jesus is? While visiting the town of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked His disciples, “Who are people saying that I am?” They said, some think you are John the Baptist, raised from the dead, or Elijah, announcing the end of the world, or one of the prophets. Then Jesus looked them in the eye and asked, “But, who do YOU say that I AM?” Simon Peter, who would later deny that he knew Jesus,

(WOMAN

I think I've seen you somewhere.

I remember.

You were with that man they took away.

I recognize your face.

PETER

You've got the wrong man lady.

I don't know him,

And I wasn't where he was tonight

Never near the place.

SOLDIER

That's strange, for I am sure I saw you with him.

You were right by his side, and yet you denied.

PETER

I tell you I was never with him.

OLD MAN

But I saw you too.

He looked just like you.

PETER

I don't know him!

MARY MAGDALENE

Peter, don't you know what you have said.

You've gone and cut him dead.

PETER

I had to do it, don't you see?

Or else they'd go for me.

MARY MAGDALENE

It's what he told us you would do.

I wonder how he knew.)

hastily makes a staggering confession of faith: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” As we celebrate this Eucharist to commemorate 50 + 1 years as a Priest and 25 +1 years as a Bishop, Jesus of Nazareth looks each of us in the eye and asks: Who do you say that I Am? We should pause before hastily responding as Peter did: “You are the Christ. The Son of the living God!” Only to later deny we even know Jesus, when our faith is tested.

Like the crowds that followed Jesus in Caesarea Philippi, Americans give Jesus very different answers to His soul penetrating question: Jesus, you were a man full of God’s Love... You are the Son of God ... A great Prophet... Jesus, you are my Lord and Savior ... You are someone I never think about... A man like any other man ... the founder of the Catholic Church... A subversive political revolutionary...Jesus, you are someone who never really existed... A fabrication of the early Church... The Lord of Lords and King of Kings, the ruler of the universe, the one whose resurrection from the dead is the single most important event in human history... Jesus Christ, you are the one who commands me to love every person in the world as I love myself ... You assure me that even though I will surely die, I will share eternal life with You.

I have a friend, who was raised as a devout Catholic, who gradually drifted away from his faith. The story of Jesus, he argues, really is the greatest story ever told. But that’s all it is, a great story that he no longer believes to be true. My friend acknowledges that the Christian faith gives great meaning and inspiration to many people like St. Theresa of Calcutta. Even though she sometimes felt the absence of God, she was ultimately motivated to give up everything in service of the poor, the sick and the dying because of her belief that Jesus Christ is who he said he was. “Jesus Christ is the Way!” My friend has moved from belief to unbelief, and he simply cannot make that “leap of faith” back to critically informed belief. When I ask him what does he place at the center of his life in place of the Christian story? What gives his life and certain death ultimate meaning? His response seems to be, “Well, maybe nothing. But I’m ok with that since I am being honest with myself.”

At a milestone such as a golden Jubilee, Jesus' question is: But, EDWARD, who do **YOU** say that I am? When I was growing up, I never thought I wanted to be a priest. It is by a strange fate and a stranger fortune that I am a priest today. When I was eleven years old, I told my Mother Dear, Evelyn and my beloved father, Cullen, that I would not live very long. Since I was in very good health, they asked me why I would say such a thing. I told them, "I said it because I realize that NO ONE lives very long. I can tell by the speed with which one-year races by that the longest human life, even if it is more than one hundred years, is very brief. Every human life goes by in a flash." My father said, "Son, you are a very old 11 year old, wise before your time."

There was never any pressure from my family for me to enter the seminary. I always thought I would go to St. Ignatius College Preparatory school become a physician, an attorney, or even, an actor, marry Beverly Anne Ponton, with whom I thought I was in love in 7th grade and have a large family. It was my BVM teachers, Sr. Mary Antoine, Sr. Mary Mildred, and my pastor, Msgr. O'Brien, who encouraged me to think about the priesthood, since I served Mass almost every day. Looking back, I think of my 11-year-old self-meditating on the brevity of life and the unbearable lightness of being. These musings, enflamed by my prayers, listening to the scripture readings and receiving the eucharist at daily Mass, no doubt triggered the idea of considering the priesthood. It was the beginning of my gradual response to Jesus' question, "Who do YOU say that I am?" For a mature Christian, the authentic answer to that question is not a hasty response like Peter's, it is the result of a long, sometimes difficult dialogue of the soul.

On that rainy Saturday morning May 13, 1970, when I was ordained a priest forever, I was answering Jesus' question. I expressed that response I my first Mass sermon, on May 17, 1970, when I said, "A priest today must he be a man of deep personal faith, conformed to Jesus Christ." Looking back over the moving viewpoint of my life as a priest and bishop, I can say while I have certainly had days in my life as a priest and bishop when I was profoundly unhappy, there has never been a day when I was unhappy that I was a priest. It is what I was meant to be! I have long been preoccupied with *mysterium tremendum*, the tremendous mystery of existence and "*the Idea of the Holy*" and the person of Jesus Christ.

"Learn your faith! Love your faith! Live your faith! , Listen! Learn! Think! Pray! And Act!" And: Never forget that God is not God the way we would be God, if we were God! These imperatives have been at the center of my vision as a Priest and Bishop. In this morning's reading from his pastoral letter, St. James tells us exactly what it means for Christians to Live their faith. James asks us what good is it if we say we have faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, if that faith is not expressed in good works for others. If we know someone who has no food or no clothes and we say, "Go in peace keep warm and eat well" and we do not help them, what good is that? James challenges us saying faith that does not produce good works is dead, not really faith at all. At the same time, James teaches us that it is faith in Christ that leads to salvation, not the good works we perform. But authentic faith necessarily overflows with doing good for others.

This of, course, is the tragedy of our time. Many people say they have religious faith, but that faith is not made manifest in good works towards other people. “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” Some version of this golden rule is expressed in all major religions. Yet people who say they have faith, narrow the reach of those whom they will treat with love. Their dead faith produces no good works because they have not answered Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” we see this throughout history. Many plantation owners in the Americas professed the Christian, even the Catholic faith. Yet they developed the horrific west African slave trade capturing millions of African people, dragging them across the Atlantic in the Middle passage, (throwing thousands overboard), so they could be beasts of burden enriching their “masters” on cotton, tobacco, and sugar cane plantations. Many of the Nazis in Germany asserted their Christian faith, yet they set out to exterminate more than 6 million Jewish people and other so-called “undesirables” at Auschwitz, and Dachau in the Holocaust. Yesterday we marked the twentieth anniversary of that terrible day, September 11, 2001, when the militant Islamist terrorist group al-Qaeda, perverting the teachings of Islam attacked the United States slaughtering 2,996 innocent people. And, in our own day, people who claim to have faith manage to ignore Christ’s command to do the good works of loving all people when they abuse and disrespect women, when they oppress people of different ethnic, racial, and religious groups, discriminate against people of different sexual orientations, and when deny the value of fragile developing human life in the womb. Faith without good works is dead!

I am in your midst this morning marking the anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood and the episcopacy, praying that we all may continue to answer Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” with one voice: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” -Not only with words, but also with deeds!

“God has given us Jesus Christ, his Son, as our Lord and Redeemer. Jesus always showed compassion for children and for the poor, for the sick and for sinners, and He became a neighbor to the oppressed and the afflicted. By word and deeds, He announced to the world that God is our Father and that He care for all His sons and daughters.

Open our eyes, O Lord, to the needs of our sisters and brothers.
Inspire in us words and deeds to comfort those who labor and are burdened.
Make us serve them truly, after the example of Christ Himself and at his command.
And may your Church stand as a living witness
to truth and freedom,
to peace and justice.
So that all people may be raised up to a new hope!”

Praise be Jesus Christ. Both Now and Forever! AMEN!