

HOMILY for 21st SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – Year A

As I reflect on the friendship between Peter & Jesus & their conversation in today's Gospel, I'm reminded of this cute story that I want to share with you.

Little old lady sees a boy sitting alone on a curb of the sidewalk & asks, "Why are you sitting here all by yourself, little boy? Haven't you anyone to play with?"

Little boy answers, "oh yes, I have one friend, but I hate him!"

Anyway, we usually do not view Peter & Jesus as friends. But for the sake of this Sunday's Gospel story, let's assume they were good friends. Remember that they've been around each other for some time. They've known each other's personality & emotions. They've learned to appreciate each other's company. They've discussed & exchanged ideas about various spiritual issues. But, they did not seem to know each other quite well yet. So, today Jesus wanted to check with his friend/disciple to see how well Peter knew Him. He began to ask Peter, "Who do people say that I am?" Peter answered, "Some say John the Baptist or Elijah. Others think it might be Jeremiah or one of the ancient prophets coming back from the dead." In other words, the public apparently thought highly of Jesus & considered Him to be one of the ancient prophets. They respected Him & viewed Him as an amazing religious leader.

That was great news! But it was not what Jesus was looking for. That was not the reason why Jesus came down to earth. He did not come to build up His reputation & create a name for Himself. Rather, He came to bring us salvation & re-establish a personal relationship with us. That's why He asked Peter/His friend this personal question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter was caught by surprise with that question after he already reported to Jesus what the public thought about his Master/friend. Everyone was astonished to see Peter answer the question correctly as he said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus praised Peter for his excellent answer & credited it to God the Father for revealing that secret to His friend. The Lord also rewarded Peter for that great insight by promising to build His Church on behalf of His friend. He would let Peter watch over His Church & make all the important decisions for it on earth.

But, that's not the happy ending we might have anticipated between these 2 friends. If we read today's Gospel passage a little further, we'll see that the relationship between Peter & Jesus would be tested. Peter's faith in his friend was in question as Jesus revealed about His death & resurrection. Peter was shocked & terrified when he heard that his friend would suffer & die on the Cross. Peter thought his journey with Jesus was smooth & fun. Or, his faith & hope in his friend Jesus would not be tested & face tough time. Peter soon found out that their relationship would run into rough patch & endure all sorts of tests. Peter evidently failed the first test as he heard about his friend's suffering & death on the Cross. Jesus was so mad at Peter that He told His friend, "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You judge by human standards, not as God does." Peter clearly did not know Jesus well. It'd take him until the death & resurrection of Jesus to figure out everything about his friend.

There've been numerous books written about Jesus. Many well-known Scripture scholars have talked & written about this amazing miracle worker & divine figure. But, today Jesus wants to pose the same question to us as He once did to His friend Peter. He asks each & every one of us, "Who do you say that I am?" Some people might rattle off all kinds of religious phrases about Jesus & think they know everything about Him. But, the truth is that they don't.

Like a parrot, they simply repeat what they've learned from a Religious Ed class or what they've picked up from books & theologians. That's the problem with most of the faithful over the centuries. They basically recite what they've read & heard about Jesus. Many popular speakers are good at using fancy phrases to describe Jesus & His mission on earth. But, they do not have a close relationship with Jesus or a personal experience with the Lord at all. Some might even have a lifestyle that is contrary to what they preach. In contrast, the saints & faithful believers have a personal relationship with Jesus. They don't recite what others might have said or heard about the Lord. They'd often describe their relationship with Jesus in these terms: best friend, faithful companion, personal Savior, wonderful lover, trusted guide, & so on.

Those close relationships & personal experiences with Jesus are what our Lord wants to encourage Peter & all of us to establish. He wants us to find out who He really is on our own. He asks us to take ownership of our faith & wrestle with it daily. He wants us to learn more about Him by inviting Him into our lives. The reason our world has become secular or indifferent about Christ & its faith life is because it has not tried hard enough to build a close relationship with Him. Some mystic saints like John of the Cross & Teresa of Avila had such an intimate relationship with Jesus that they often referred to Him as their lover. Others like St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta felt very comfortable around Jesus & talked to Him as a friend every day. Until we have invested enough time with Jesus & gone through some tough time with Him, we really don't know who He truly is.

My dear brothers & sisters, I'm sure you have some friends & family members whom you know quite well. You can trust them with your life & look up to them as your role model. All of that would happen only if you've spent lots of time & done lots of things with them. Today Jesus comes to each & every one of us & asks, "Who do you say that I am?" I hope we know the answer for that question. The best way for us to answer it is to begin spending more time with Jesus in prayer & the Eucharist & learning more about Him by reading the Bible every day.