

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time B: September 12, 2021  
*"Thou art the Christ!"*

This week we come across the St. Mark's account of what is called the Confession of St. Peter. What is that? The Gospel account, which we hear proclaimed at Holy Mass, instructs us:

*Jesus and His disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Along the way, He asked His disciples, 'Who do people say that I AM?' They said in reply, 'John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others, one of the prophets.' And He asked them, 'And you, who do you say that I AM?' Peter said to Him in reply, 'You are the Christ.' Then He warned them not to tell anyone about Him. (St. Mark 8. 27-30)*

Very simply, the Confession of St. Peter is the Apostle, Peter's acclamation to Our Lord stating – to both Jesus and the other disciples – that Jesus is the Christ. In the first volume of Pope Benedict's book *Jesus of Nazareth*, the Holy Father Emeritus examines the traditional understanding of the Confession of St. Peter (*Thou art the Christ!*), and, in his usual, insightful manner, digs deeper, stretching the parameter of that Confession to include a dialogue between Christ, on the one hand, and ourselves. How is it that the Holy Father does this?

If we understand that St. Peter is not only destined to be the future Vicar of Christ, but, even as he stands before the Lord, he is the Man of Faith, standing in our very stead, symbolic of our very selves, then, *we enter into that very dialogue between Christ and the Twelve!* Thus, the following words written by the Holy Father cause two points to come clear:

All three Synoptic Gospels present Jesus' question to the disciples about who the people think He is and who they themselves consider Him to be (Mk 8: 27-30; Mt. 16: 13-20; Lk 9 18-21) as an important milestone on His way. In all three Gospels, Peter answers in the name of the Twelve with a confession that is markedly different from the opinion of the 'people.' In all three Gospels, Jesus then foretells His Passion and Resurrection, and continues this announcement of His own destiny with a teaching about the way of discipleship, the way to follow Him, the Crucified. (1)

What are the two points? 1) The Holy Father writes: "Peter answers in the name of the Twelve with a confession (*Thou art the Christ*) that is markedly different from the opinion of the 'people.'" Just as Peter answers in the name of the Twelve, as Vicar of Christ and Head of the Mystical Body of Christ on Earth, i.e., the Church, he answers, also, *for us*, thus, as I said before, allowing us, in faith, to enter into a dialogue between Christ and the Twelve. Peter's 'Confession of Faith' thus draws himself, the other disciples *and us*, out of the midst of the 'people' and makes us a 'people of faith.' And 2) The Confession of Peter (*Thou art the Christ*) which makes us a 'people of faith,' thus entails more than just a mere belief (by which I mean an intellectual assent to the teachings of Christ and His Church even if that assent is accompanied by an emotional assent of the heart). By what authority can I make this claim – that the

Confession of Peter entails more than mere belief, that it is not enough just to say "I believe," or even "I love the Lord?"

I am making this claim by dint of the very Gospel passage we are reading today. Notice, after the Lord bids the Twelve not to tell anyone [yet] that He is the Christ, He then begins "*to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days.*" (St. Mark 8. 31) And the Scripture points out the Lord "*spoke this openly.*" But – and this is where you and I come in! What happens next?

"*Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. At this, He turned, and, looking at His disciples, rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind Me, satan. You are not thinking as God does, but as man.'*" (St. Mark 8. 33) The Holy Father makes a fascinating point when he looks at modern scholarship of the last hundred years or so, especially that area of learning that was once referred to as comparative religions, now normally called religious studies. As he points out, that while so many scholars might agree that Jesus is a 'prophet,' "These various opinions are not simply mistaken; they are greater or lesser approximations to the mystery of Jesus, and they can certainly set us on the path toward Jesus' real identity." (2) But, the Holy Father is quick to clarify this path by saying:

But they do not arrive at Jesus' identity, at His newness. They interpret Him in terms of the past, in terms of the predictable and the possible, not in terms of Himself, His uniqueness, which cannot be assigned to any other category. Today, too, similar opinions are clearly held by the 'people' who have somehow or other come to know Christ, who have perhaps even made a scholarly study of Him, but have not encountered Jesus Himself in His utter uniqueness and otherness. Karl Jaspers spoke of Jesus alongside Socrates, the Buddha, and Confucius as one of the four paradigmatic individuals. He thus acknowledged that Jesus is of fundamental significance in the search for the right way to be human. Yet for all that, Jesus remains on among others grouped within a common category, in terms of which they can be explained and delimited. (3)

How often do we hear this message today? Jesus was a great man? Jesus was a great teacher? Jesus was a man of peace? But, do we hear the full message of St. Peter's Confession which was the answer to Jesus' question about Who He Was [Is] – "*Who do people say I AM?*"

To say that Jesus is Lord demands that we go a step further: and that step is outlined by Christ at the end of the passage of St. Mark's Gospel which we read today: "*Whoever wishes to come after Me must deny Himself, take up His Cross and follow Me.*" Jesus is *not* just an interesting man/teacher/peace-nik who came to give us an interesting message... Oh no. We listen to Him to our peril... or we do not listen at all. He demands a response, and the response takes us out of ourselves. That is why I said above: "It's not enough to say 'I believe,' or even 'I love.'" 'I believe' or 'I love' won't fly unless it's proved by believing and loving God and our neighbour, even, if necessary, to the shedding of our blood. For most of us, to be sure, it will be heart's blood, but blood, nonetheless. This call of Jesus demands, now,

just as it did two thousand years ago, that we be drawn from the midst of ourselves and ordinary 'people,' into a 'people of Faith.' And once we become a 'people of Faith,' then, we can understand the meaning of the words of St. Peter: "Once you were no-people, but now are God's-people; once there was no mercy for you, but now you have found mercy!" (1 Peter 2. 10) And, also, in St. John: "To Him Who loves us and freed us from our sins by His won blood, Who made us a royal nation of priests in the service of God and Father – to Him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen." (Revelations 1. 5b-6)

Now, the Holy Father refers to the words in the Gospel "Thou art the Christ" and the His teaching given to the Twelve, that He will suffer, die and rise after three days – as two kinds of Confessions, each one explaining and elucidating the other. His Holiness explains: "The two types of confession belong together, and each one is incomplete and ultimately unintelligible without the other." (4) Why is that? Very simply, to say that 'Jesus is Lord,' is very easy. To live that creedal statement, to live that Faith, is quite another. Something about 'all talk and no do?'

To live the Cross seems an impossible thing to do, all by Itself. But, if we take a step back, what do we see? There is the Lord, in His suffering, with eyes that are pleading our salvation. St. Thomas Aquinas points out that the last thing His eyes gazed upon were the tears of His Mother and that of the Beloved Apostle, St. John. And that reminds us, there, at the foot of the Cross, is His Mother, Our Mother, Mary, and the other women. And, St. John. Of all the men that followed Him, only the young, virginal St. John remained there, at the foot of the Cross.

May I leave you with some beautiful words I found while I was researching this topic? They are the words of a great, French poet and dramatist, Paul Claudel, (+ 1955), describing his conversion to the Catholic Faith while hearing Vespers at Notre Dame in Paris on 25<sup>th</sup> December, 1886:

After all, my Lady, you're the one who took the initiative...

It was the darkest day of winter, the blackest of rainy afternoons in Paris,  
Vespers in the half-night of Christmas...

Israel's roar to her God, down through the centuries, in the rising,  
Expanding smoke....

Notre Dame, Woman-Church, with great shouts,  
full of God, erecting  
Her own *Magnificat*...

And there I was, wretched boy! Yes, me! What did I do to be carried  
Away like this?...

Nothing to do against the wild overflow of hope!  
Nothing to do against this eruption of faith, as if the world itself were  
Breaking up inside me!

Nothing to do against that voice... saying to me:  
You're mine!  
Nothing to do against the impetuosity of the fool who says: I believe!

So you see, my Lady, everything that has happened since, I'm afraid,  
It's your responsibility! (5)

1. His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Doubleday, New York, 2007, pg. 287
2. Ibid., pg. 292
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., pg. 298
5. M. Paul Claudel, 'Le 25 decembre 1886', *Œuvre Poétique* (Paris, 1957), p. 771f, cited in John Saward Home Page, Christ The Light of the Nations, part 2, pgs. 15-16, [www.christendom-awake.org](http://www.christendom-awake.org)