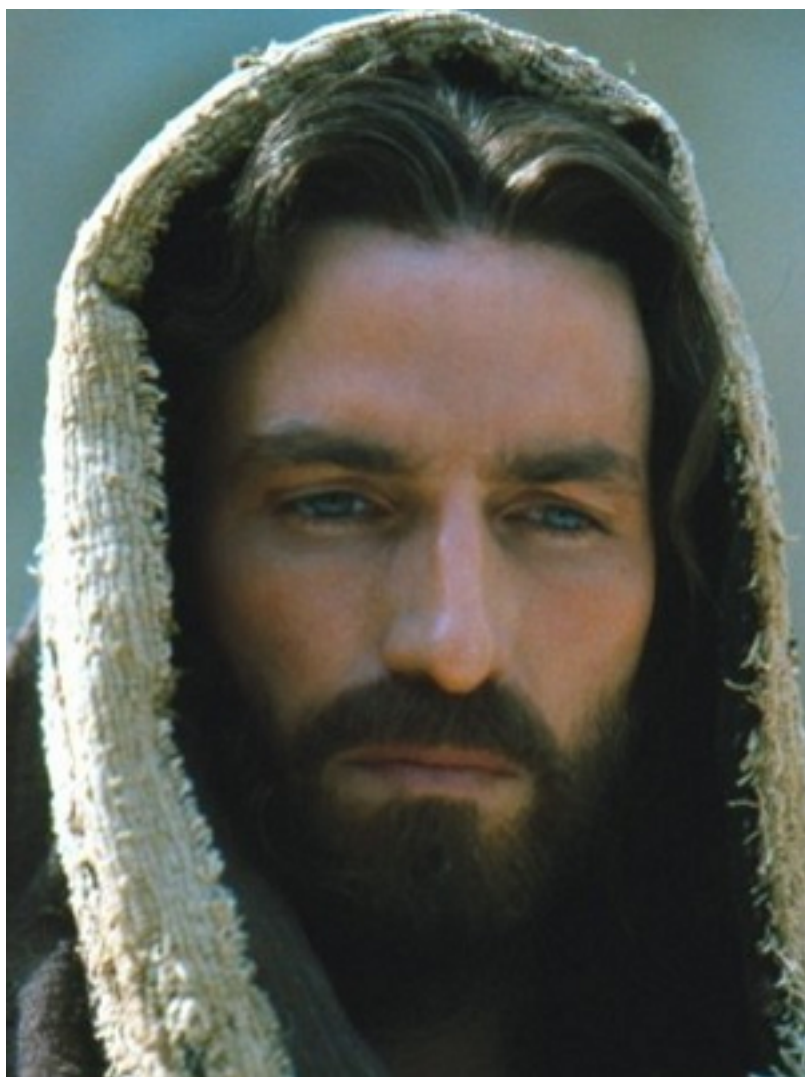


Commentary to the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Which Peter Are We?



This Sunday's Gospel reading is familiar, but it seems to be missing some verses. We hear Jesus asking his disciple: "Who do people say I am." We hear Peter's answer, "You are the Christ," but then Jesus moves on to speak about how he would suffer greatly. We are missing something. Actually, we are missing a lot. There are no references to Jesus changing Simon's name to Peter, no references to Peter being the rock on which the Church will be built, no references to Peter being entrusted with the Keys of the Kingdom. All this is found in the Gospel of Matthew, but today's reading is from the Gospel of Mark. Mark's gospel emphasizes the demands of Christianity.

For example, where in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus says, "Anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it." Mark expands this to "Anyone who loses his life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it." The good news of Jesus Christ demands sacrifice, even the sacrifice of our lives. Mark's emphasis is the cross. This is not just the cross that Jesus died on. The cross that Mark presents is the cross we are called to embrace. Sacrificial love must be the way of the followers of Christ. That is what the Letter of James is speaking about in today's second reading when he says, "I will demonstrate my

faith to you through my works.” This is not how we want to hear religion presented. We want religion to be less demanding. We want to hear that if we just do our best to be decent Christian people, our lives will be easy now and there will be eternal rewards in the hereafter. But Jesus never promised us that our lives would be easy. He said that they would have meaning, and purpose, and relevancy. This is what He means when He said that we have to lose our lives for His sake and the sake of the Gospel to find life.

In his great book, *Letters to a Young Catholic*, a book I recommend that Catholics of all ages read, George Weigel speaks about the weakness that Peter exhibited in the days before Easter and Pentecost. One time Peter walked on water towards Jesus, but then lost his focus, and began to drown. In today's Gospel, Peter tried to stop the Lord from accomplishing the will of the Father, thus aligning himself with the devil. That is why Jesus called him Satan. Peter publically denied Christ three times. Yet, Peter allowed his life to be radically changed by Christ. Weigel notes that the evangelists, the writers of the gospels, did not present the disciples as plastic saints, but as weak men who realized that the only way they could keep their eyes fixed on Jesus would be to become courageous heroes. And they did become courageous heroes. Peter left the security of his little fishing business in Galilee to journey through a world that wanted all people serious about God dead. He went to the capital of that pagan world, Rome, where he knew his proclamation of the gospel would cost him his life. He was condemned to be crucified, but, tradition has it, when he was brought to the place of crucifixion, right next to where the Basilica of St. Peter stands now, he asked that he be crucified head down because he did not deserve to be crucified like the Savior. Yes, Peter had been weak. He had failed. But, as Weigel reminds us, weakness and failure have been part of the Catholic reality from the beginning and extending to modern times.

This includes the weakness, failure, stupidity and cowardice among its ordained leaders. But purification among Catholics in whatever their vocations in life may be and their rededication to Christ demonstrate that with Jesus Christ failure is not the final word. Emptiness and oblivion, Weigel writes, are not our destiny. Love is the final word, and love is the most living thing of all because love is of God. When we keep our eyes focused on the Lord, we can do what might seem impossible, be that walking on water or living an authentic Catholic life. We can live our lives as the gift for others that our lives were meant to be. Weigel writes that we can discover the depths of our lives by emptying ourselves of our own self concerns. I particularly love this quote, "In the Catholic view of things, walking on water is an entirely sensible thing to do. It's staying in the boat, hanging tightly to our own sad little securities, that's rather mad." There are times that we have all acted in a rather insane way. How could it possibly be sane for us to walk away from Jesus Christ? Yet, we do this. We have held onto our sins as though we could not live without them.

We have made our possessions our security. And we have sacrificed our opportunity to follow Christ, to live for Christ and to die for Christ. But then, we have returned. We are here now, aren't we? We are here because we know that sacrificing ourselves for Christ, living an authentic Catholic life, gives us

the greatest life we could ever possess, the life of Jesus Christ. During this last week we have watched videos of people in the Moslem world who hate us because we are Americans. We experienced fourteen years ago that this hatred was not confined to the American presence in the embassies in their countries, but to all Americans including those here in the United States. These same radicals also hate us here in this Church because we are committed to our Catholicism. But they are not the only people who hate us. Many of those who have rejected God, many of those who claim that there is no God, hate all whose lives are determined by their faith.

There are people in your workplace, at your school, in your neighborhood, who hate you because you are here, and more, because you bring your faith outside of these walls to where they are, to the world. Their scorn, their mockery, and even their attacks present us with a great gift. They give us the opportunity to embrace the cross of Christ by refusing to back down from our faith. They give us the opportunity to be courageous. Are we going to join the Disciple Peter, the one whose view of life was limited to the physical world, or will we join the Apostle Peter who lived and died for the spiritual? This is the fundamental choice of our lives. We are called upon today to follow Christ, to embrace our faith, to share our faith, and, when it is needed, to suffer for our faith. We pray today for the courage to live our faith.

Fr. Joseph Pellegrino, SJ