

## Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Feb 22nd 2016

Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter, Apostle

“When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” That’s the wry advice of one of America’s favorite humorists, Yogi Berra. Today’s Gospel presents us with two such paths, papal primacy and recognizing who Jesus is. I propose to take Yogi’s direction in my reflection.

Jesus’ identity, then and now, is one of the most important questions any human ever had to answer.

Why? This is not just a catechism exam question. Everything we do hinges on our answer. If, as Peter acknowledges, Jesus is the literal son of the creating, living God, then we must pattern our lives after His. And the buck doesn’t stop with Peter. Jesus asks that question of all of us. Our answer defines what it means to be “Christian”. It not just a matter of being a member of a vast international organization (a “church”). It’s literally a vocation. Jesus says elsewhere, “Come, follow me.” The call follows from the recognition of Jesus’ identity.

With regard to the papal office, we note that the papacy is not just a structural feature of Roman Catholicism. Actually, Jesus gave Peter a truly global job: (“Feed my lambs; tend my sheep” – John 21:14–16). What that feeding and tending involves is a unifying function – bringing together, and holding together, those who are, by Jesus’ cross and resurrection, truly one body. The Acts of the Apostles provides two practical examples of what that means in real life. One is Peter’s role in resolving the dispute over the widows of the Hellenists (Acts 6), and the other is his role in what is sometimes called the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 21), which concerned what was needed of a Christian convert. It’s important to note that, in both disputes, Peter did not find one party in the right, and the other in the wrong – an outcome the contestants – at least some of them – might have preferred.

Instead, he found a compromise outcome that both could live with – and at the same time live together and as one body.

That’s interesting information, but the Scriptures are never intended to be just informative. Rather, they challenge us to action. What these Scriptures tell us is that the tendency to be divisive, to fight with one another over the things of religion, goes back to the very beginnings of Christianity, and that this tendency is not irreversible. Finally, feeding and tending, while surely the responsibility of Peter and his successors, are ours as well. Each of us is called to support efforts at unification and reconciliation, both within the church and in the larger society. That’s how, in fact, we can be recognized as “Christian.”

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