

Twenty-first Sunday of the Year

FORMATION OF A LEADER & GIVING OUR OWN ANSWERS. Matthew 16: 13-20

The Gospel story shows that the primacy of Peter was not something that was invented by the Church later on. It went right back to the beginning, yes, to the mind and the will of Christ himself. Peter is one of the most interesting characters in the Gospel. It's clear that he had leadership qualities. But it's also clear that he had glaring weaknesses. In the Gospels we see his ups and downs. Sometimes he is very brave; other times he is very cowardly. Sometimes he is like a rock; other times he is more like a piece of jelly. He is almost too human. Certainly not our idea of a saint, or even the ideal person to be the head of Christ's Church.

But it's very interesting to see how Jesus dealt with him. How he helped him to grow into the man who was ready to lay down his life for him, and who eventually did. This growth was a gradual thing, and there were some regressions. But this is how growth happens. To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often. Let us take a closer look at the relationship between Jesus and Peter. It will help us to grow as human beings and as disciples of Jesus. And it will show us how best to help those we love to grow. It all began when Jesus called him. Obviously Jesus saw potential in him. We all need someone to believe in us. It is hard to believe in ourselves if no one else believes in us. Peter didn't think he deserved that call. He said, 'Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinful man'. Jesus did not deny that Peter was a sinner, but he challenged him to grow. We need to be challenged. Demands have to be made on us. Not to demand anything from someone is to condemn that person to sterility. Jesus involved him in his work. He made him a partner in it, not a mere messenger boy. Responsibility helps people to grow. He asked him to declare his loyalty. Once when large numbers of people were leaving him, walking away from Jesus; Jesus turned to Peter and said, "Will you also go?" This forced Peter to look into his own heart, and to stand on his own two feet. This helps growth. When Peter made his great declaration of faith: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God', Jesus praised him and promised him further responsibility. We all need recognition for work well done. We all need affirmation. This encourages further generosity. Jesus corrected him. When Peter drew his sword in the garden of Gethsemane Jesus said to him, 'Put away your sword'. It takes courage on the part of the tutor to point out mistakes. And to learn from one's mistakes is an essential part of growth.

Jesus once told him off. Thus when Peter wanted to prevent him from going to Jerusalem, Jesus said, 'Get behind me, Satan, you are more of a hindrance to me than a help'. At times the tutor may have to reprove. But there is an art in doing it. Jesus confronted him with his failure to stay awake in the garden: Can you not watch even one hour with me? It doesn't help to let someone away with sloppiness and shoddiness. He even threatened to cut him off over the feet-washing incident. We have to be stern at times and refuse to compromise on matters of principle.

He understood that when Peter denied him, he did so more out of weakness than out of malice. It was under duress! He forgave him and gave him the chance to begin again. We all need someone who can understand our weakness, and who doesn't write us off when we don't produce the goods right away.

But Jesus never spoiled Peter. That would be to ruin his chance of growing. The thread which runs right through their relationship was love. Peter knew that Jesus loved him. Love is the climate in which people can grow. This was the rock in Peter's life. We can imagine that Peter made a very good leader. A leader has to be aware of his own weakness. The experience of denying Jesus rid Peter of pride and blind reliance on his own resources. At the same time it enabled him to understand the weakness of others.

Peter's story is our story too. We too blow hot and cold. Sometimes we are strong, and other times we are weak.

Without a warm relationship with Christ, we are only on the fringes of Christianity. We are like someone talking about love compared with someone who is in love.

The question Jesus raised with the apostles in today's Gospel was not a tricky one or a trivial one. It was a very serious question. It is a question that resounds through the entire Gospel. It is the main question of the Gospel.

It concerns the identity of Jesus. Everything hinges on this. He didn't pluck this question out of the air. It was a question that obviously was on the lips of everyone: 'Who is this man Jesus?'

Having heard what others were saying, Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked, 'And you, who do you say that I am?' No doubt he already knew what they thought. Still, he gave them the opportunity to express it themselves.

We can only marvel at how Jesus said nothing to Simon, but waited for the Father to speak to him first.

It is important for us to come up with our own answers. To be able to state our own beliefs and values as Christians. It is no longer sufficient to repeat the official answers. We have to make the faith our own.

A secondhand faith is a poor faith. We must grow in our understanding of the faith. The important thing is to believe our personal conviction. The more of such people we have in the Church, the more it is founded on rock. The crucial question for each of us: Who is Christ for me? Is he the Son of the living God for me? And if so, how does this belief affect the way I live? To answer correctly that question is to answer with Christ-like acts!