

**HOMILY FOR SEPTEMBER 15-16, 2012**

Once I've established a rapport with my students, I've been known to say, Sometimes I feel just like Jesus, Have I been so long with you, yet you do not yet understand what I'm trying to say? Usually that line is good for a few laughs and we go forward. Actually, Jesus spoke somewhat more sharply, as we shall see.

Today's readings spoke to me in this way. All of the readings are about hearing correctly, seeing correctly and responding. The first reading is curious. It begins, The Lord God opens my ear that I may hear; and I have not rebelled, have not turned back. This line is taken from one of the four poems found in Second Isaiah that have come to be called the Suffering Servant Songs. Isaiah never identifies the person or group to whom he is referring. Most scholars think it is either a personification of Israel, God's Servant that has been suffering in exile, or even Isaiah himself. The early Christians applied these songs to Jesus, the crucified Savior, the one who heard from God the need to restore Israel, and who did not rebel.

But, perhaps more importantly, we need to ask what does this mean for us, today? If we have enough of a relationship with God to desire to listen to this all-encompassing Mystery, why would we rebel when the Lord speaks to us? We each must face our own rebellion, but I know I rebel and turn back when I don't hear what I would like to hear. I turn back when I hear the promptings of conscience that I want to ignore. I just don't want to change my lifestyle to foster a more just global society. I don't want to do with less so that others may have more. I don't want to hear the cry of the poor; it makes me uncomfortable. In a sentence, I turn away from engaging the reality of the world in which I live; the world with its beauty and its ugliness; the world for which I am responsible. Fortunately, I don't always rebel; personal conversion is usually gradual, and I know I am in great company with other followers of Jesus from Peter right on down to those of us gathered here. Despite it all, we know that we are greatly loved and embraced, and this great love never diminishes even in the face of our rebellion. We know that this God, who tells us who he is in Jesus, is willing to stick with us and keep trying to help us understand and to embrace the Divine message without rebellion.

We learn this from today's Gospel. Today's reading is the pinnacle of the Gospel of Mark. Halfway through the Gospel, Jesus directs that probing question, But who do you say that I am? to his disciples. Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah, but he only partially understands what he is saying. The next three chapters center around Jesus saying that the Messiah must suffer persecution and betrayal under the religious authorities and death under the Roman authority. Peter heard, but rebelled. He insisted Jesus was wrong. How difficult it was to instruct these disciples who listened but did not really get it. What a wonderful picture of Jesus and Peter walking down the road toward Bethany and Jerusalem arguing over how Jesus understood his calling. Two human beings, totally honest with one another, angrily disagreeing, but bonded by a concern for each other that prevented a total break in their relationship. We know the story of this developing loyalty of Jesus and Peter.

From this Gospel passage and the following chapters we learn who Mark believed Jesus to be, the crucified savior. I certainly would not disagree with him. If Jesus were addressing us, today, and asked, who do people say I am, we could answer, Mark says you are the suffering, crucified messiah. But then, if Jesus looked each of us in the eye and asked, but who do YOU say that I am, what would our answer be? It is good to believe on the authority of Mark, but there comes a time when we need to believe because we have experienced that Jesus saves us from all that prevents us from becoming completely human, and that differs for each of us. Can we, in our own right respond, You are the Messiah? with the passion of having experienced an encounter with a personal reality? How, do we come to know Jesus well enough to even begin answering that question? I could say, taking my cue from Jesus himself. You are the one whom I meet every day in the hungry and the thirsty. You are the one who challenges me to listen to the wisdom of the parables, who tries to open my eyes and open my ears. But ultimately I must come to know Jesus, not simply with my mind or just with my heart, not even through his self-revelation. I must come to know Jesus by embracing him as one person embraces another and allowing myself to hear through the everyday voices others, those who agree with me and those who do not. I know, really know, who Jesus is by opening my whole self to the lure of his love. I know, really know who Jesus is by allowing Jesus to open himself to my care by my embracing his body, the world, our church. And then, maybe, I'll understand a little bit, but not all of what it means to know Jesus, to be a disciple. I will, though, in some way be able to answer that question, Who do you say that I am, in my own right, in my own voice. As with Peter, Jesus cares enough for me that he will build on this partial knowledge of him throughout my life, as long as I continue to listen to the reality that surrounds me.

In the contemporary world, we have become increasingly aware of the role institutions play in our lives. And so, I can imagine Jesus not only looking into the eyes of each of us, asking, But who do you say that I am? I can also imagine him addressing the hierarchy gathered as a body, and asking them, But who do you say that I am? Who do you know that I am by opening your authority to the lure of my love for each of you, a love that accepts all people, all creation for who they are, imperfect, manifesting various degrees of blindness and deafness? Bishops, too, are challenged to listen to continued revelation that occurs through our everyday encounters with what Vatican II described as the signs of the times. The bishops know, but like all of us, like their brother Peter, only partially and must be open to increasing their understanding of who Jesus is.

Finally, Luther did not like the Epistle of James because it focuses on the importance of doing works. He was correct that we don't save ourselves no matter how many of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy we perform, no matter how many protests we undertake, no matter how much of our material goods we give away. We don't save ourselves at all. Jesus the Christ has already done that. We are freed from that concern. If we love someone, though, our hearts pour out in gratitude. Because we love Jesus, we share in Jesus' concern for those in need. But our service is overflowing with no expectation of recompense. We are already loved. Nothing can change that.

So, where have these readings brought us? I think this gospel reading prompts us to have the courage to allow ourselves to experience the Divine, as divinity is manifested in Jesus. We know with our minds as well as our hearts; our heart, as well as our mind. When we've allowed ourselves that experience of grace, that grace will not be contained, and will spill over into the lives of those with whom we walk on our journey to Jerusalem.

Nancy C. Ring