

**Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A
(Aug. 21, 2005)**

But Who Do You Say I Am?

We usually overlook details in our Biblical stories that can have greater significance than we might think. For instance why does Matthew locate this story in the town of Caesarea-Philippi? What I am going to say right now is speculation. But it's plausible and it gives Jesus' intention here a bit more clarity.

Caesarea-Philippi was a city built by a Jewish king to honor a Roman emperor. As such it represented great power and authority. What Jesus does here is something extremely important for the Church he is founding. The keys that he gives to Peter are symbols of power and authority. It's almost as though he is saying what I am doing by giving you, Peter, and the other apostles these signs of authority, is establishing a kingdom that is greater than that represented by the worldly power of emperor and king. But there is a real paradox here, a seeming contradiction that we will hear about next Sunday. Jesus then goes on to tell the apostles that this kingdom will be established through suffering and death, that he, the Messiah whom Peter had correctly identified, will suffer, die, and rise again on the third day. Furthermore he invites Peter and the others to follow him in this suffering and death.

In speaking this way, Jesus is not only telling them how the church would be founded, he is also telling them how it would continue to function. By imitating him. How did Jesus act? What qualities did he wish to see in his followers? First of all, compassion. His heart went out to suffering people. He fed the hungry. He cured the crippled, the blind, the paralyzed. He raised a dead boy, the only son of his widowed mother, who, without him and without a husband, would have no one to care for her.

Jesus was forgiving. When they brought a paralyzed man to him, he said your sins are forgiven. He taught us to pray, "Forgive us as we forgive others." It's not always easy to forgive, is it? I think Jesus realized this and that's why he emphasized it so much and gave the great example from the cross, "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

Those are the keys that he gave to Peter at this extremely important moment in this imperial city of Caesarea-Philippi. Those in authority in the church are not to lord it over others, the way the pagans did. No, they were to be servants, showing the same love, forgiveness, and compassion that Jesus had shown.

Now we know that this not always been the case. History abounds in examples of Church leaders who have abused their authority, even in our own time, and there is a natural angry reaction to this. But you know it seems to me that if the Church is to be the loving, compassionate, and forgiving community it is meant to be, then all of us have to take on this responsibility realizing that we share it with popes, cardinals, and bishops.

I feel certain that Jesus poses the same question to us as he did to Peter: "Who do you say I am." And it's up to all of us to ponder that question seriously and see how we will answer. Answering as boldly as Peter with the help of God makes us sharers in the responsibility of the keys and in the duty to show that compassion and forgiveness that are characteristic of Jesus

None of this is easy to do. Let's face it. But if we keep our eyes focused on Jesus, get to know him better, to love him more, and to follow him more closely as St. Ignatius urges in his Spiritual Exercises, then not only will we be better people, but our Church will be a better Church and our world will be a better place to live. That's a pretty good return on our time and effort in collaborating in the work of building the Kingdom of God.