

GOSPEL
Matthew 16:13-20

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi he put this question to his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say he is John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' 'But you,' he said 'who do you say I am?' Then Simon Peter spoke up, 'You are the Christ,' he said, 'the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Simon son of Jonah, you are a happy man! Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. So I now say to you: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven.' Then he gave the disciples strict orders not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

HOMILY OF POPE BENEDICT XVI
21 August 2011, Excerpt

The Gospel we have just heard (cf. Mt 16:13-20) suggests two different ways of knowing Christ. The first is an impersonal knowledge, one based on current opinion. When Jesus asks: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"; the disciples answer: "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets". In other words, Christ is seen as yet another religious figure, like those who came before him. Then Jesus turns to the disciples and asks them: "But who do you say that I am?" Peter responds with what is the first confession of faith: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". Faith is more than just empirical or historical facts; it is an ability to grasp the mystery of Christ's person in all its depth.

Yet faith is not the result of human effort, of human reasoning, but rather a gift of God: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven". Faith starts with God, who opens his heart to us and invites us to share in his own divine life. Faith does not simply provide information about who Christ is; rather, it entails a personal relationship with Christ, a surrender of our whole person, with all

our understanding, will and feelings, to God's self-revelation. So Jesus' question: "But who do you say that I am?", is ultimately a challenge to the disciples to make a personal decision in his regard. Faith in Christ and discipleship are strictly interconnected.

And, since faith involves following the Master, it must become constantly stronger, deeper and more mature, to the extent that it leads to a closer and more intense relationship with Jesus. Peter and the other disciples also had to grow in this way, until their encounter with the Risen Lord opened their eyes to the fullness of faith.

Today Christ is asking you the same question which he asked the Apostles: "Who do you say that I am?" Respond to him with generosity and courage. Say to him: "Jesus, I know that you are the Son of God, who have given your life for me. I want to follow you faithfully and to be led by your word. You know me and you love me. I place my trust in you and I put my whole life into your hands. I want you to be the power that strengthens me and the joy which never leaves me".

Jesus' responds to Peter's confession by speaking of the Church: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church". What do these words mean? Jesus builds the Church on the rock of the faith of Peter, who confesses that Christ is God.

The Church, then, is not simply a human institution, like any other. Rather, she is closely joined to God. Christ himself speaks of her as "his" Church. Christ cannot be separated from the Church any more than the head can be separated from the body (cf. 1 Cor 12:12). The Church does not draw her life from herself, but from the Lord.

As the Successor of Peter, let me urge you to strengthen this faith which has been handed down to us from the time of the Apostles. Make Christ, the Son of God, the centre of your life. But let me also remind you that following Jesus in faith means walking at his side in the communion of the Church. We cannot follow Jesus on our own. Anyone who would be tempted to do so "on his own", or to approach the life of faith with that kind of individualism so prevalent today, will risk never

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truly encountering Jesus, or will end up following a counterfeit Jesus.

Having faith means drawing support from the faith of your brothers and sisters, even as your own faith serves as a support for the faith of others. I ask you, dear friends, to love the Church which brought you to birth in the faith, which helped you to grow in the knowledge of Christ and which led you to discover the beauty of his love. Growing in friendship with Christ necessarily means recognizing the importance of joyful participation in the life of your parishes, communities and movements, as well as the celebration of Sunday Mass, frequent reception of the sacrament of Reconciliation, and the cultivation of personal prayer and meditation on God's word.

Friendship with Jesus will also lead you to bear witness to the faith wherever you are, even when it meets with rejection or indifference. We cannot encounter Christ and not want to make him known to others. So do not keep Christ to yourselves! Share with others the joy of your faith. The world needs the witness of your faith, it surely needs God. I think that the presence here of so many young people, coming from all over the world, is a wonderful proof of the fruitfulness of Christ's command to the Church: "Go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15). You too have been given the extraordinary task of being disciples and missionaries of Christ in other lands and countries filled with young people who are looking for something greater and, because their heart tells them

that more authentic values do exist, they do not let themselves be seduced by the empty promises of a lifestyle which has no room for God.

I pray for you with heartfelt affection. I commend all of you to the Virgin Mary and I ask her to accompany you always by her maternal intercession and to teach you how to remain faithful to God's word. I ask you to pray for the Pope, so that, as the Successor of Peter, he may always confirm his brothers and sisters in the faith. May all of us in the Church, pastors and faithful alike, draw closer to the Lord each day. May we grow in holiness of life and be effective witnesses to the truth that Jesus Christ is indeed the Son of God, the Saviour of all mankind and the living source of our hope. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What stood out to you from the Gospel or Reflection/ Homily?



Head: Pope Benedict distinguishes between knowing about Jesus and truly knowing him. What is the difference between these two ways of knowing Christ?



Heart: Peter's answer came from a relationship, not just an idea. Looking at your own life, who has Jesus revealed himself to be for you?



Hands: Benedict reminds us that faith is lived in communion with the Church, not alone. What is one way you can strengthen your participation in the life of the Church this week?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another:

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Offer prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps praying the 'Glory Be'.