

The Inclusive Community

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 13, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Identity and Discipleship

Mark 8:27-38

In order for a Gospel passage to have religious meaning it has to be about God and about us.

The theme of today's liturgy is identity and discipleship. The identity part has something to do with God; the discipleship part has something to do with us.

Identity

We saw in last week's Gospel passage that Jesus wandered almost aimlessly through Gentile territory, sorting out how he could be a Jew with a mission to the Gentiles. A Syro-Phoenician, Gentile woman led him to decide he must be both.

Today, he is in Caesarea Philippi, still far north in Israel, on the borders of Gentile territory. There were two Caesareas in Jesus' time, one on the coast, a splendid location, built by Herod the Great for Romans who did not like Jerusalem and things Jewish. It was one of the most stunning architectural achievements of the day, finished before Jesus was born. It felt like Rome when you walked into it. It was where the elite of the Roman occupying army lived. Herod named it Caesar-on-the Sea, Caesarea Maritima. It made him look good with Rome, at the expense and with the taxes of his own people.

When Herod died in 4 B.C., his sons picked up his savy. Herod Antipas who ruled Galilee and beheaded John the Baptist built a magnificent city on the Sea of Galilee and called it Tiberius. The Roman Emperor at the time was Tiberius.

A second son, Philip, who ruled northern Israel built a city and called it Caesar. It was known as Philip's Caesar (Caesarea Philippi) to distinguish it from Caesar-on-the Sea (Caesarea Maritima).

Jesus was wandering through Gentile territory, as we have seen. When he is north in Israel, he walks into Caesarea Philippi, a Gentile-looking Roman town.

Mark gives us an insight into what Jesus and the disciples talked about on these long walks. As he approaches Caesarea Philippi, he asks his disciples who people say he is. He is sorting out, as we have seen, his own identity and he asks about how he is going over with others.

The disciples report that people are confused. They say that people are convinced that Jesus is a prophet but they do not know what kind of prophet he is. Some think he is John the Baptist reincarnated; others think he is Elijah, sent from heaven to continue his work as a prophet. No one says he is the Messiah.

When Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is. Peter says, “You are the Messiah”. It is one of Peter’s great moments. It is a startling proclamation. To be the Messiah is the greatest honor that could come to a Jew. Only God would be greater than the Messiah. Peter’s best moment is matched by Jesus’ best title.

As the disciples are absorbing this, looking at Jesus to see how he is taking this in and how he will respond, they are startled by what Jesus says next. You know, he observes, I will be rejected by the leadership in Jerusalem and they will see to it that I suffer. They will kill me. I am a Messiah destined for death and defeat.

Mark quotes Jesus as declaring that he will rise from the dead in three days but no one seems to hear this or give it attention.

Peter, coming off his best moment, tells Jesus he has it wrong and this will simply not happen. The response of Jesus is Peter’s worst moment. “Peter, you are a devil. Get away from me.” Even when Peter betrayed and deserted, he was not called a devil by Jesus.

Why is Jesus so harsh? I think it is because he is trying to come to terms with being the Messiah and being defeated, tortured and executed. He does not choose this but is compelled to accept it.

Life is not just what you want but what you have to settle for and accept. Jesus does not prefer this but sees no way to escape it. He is angry with Peter because Peter is making it difficult for him to accept what he cannot avoid.

If Jesus is the Messiah, he must be what he did not anticipate: a Messiah with a mission for the Gentiles and a Messiah marked for execution. The two great enemies, pagans or Gentiles and death are the profile of what a Messiah must be and no one, including Jesus, had anticipated this.

Discipleship

So now, where does all this leave us?

Mark says that Jesus rejects Peter and then takes his disciples into a large crowd of people. He tells them all that if they wish to be disciples of this Rabbi, it will not be an easy task.

This Rabbi, wants a kingdom of values, not of exclusivity or glory or advantage. I call you. Jesus says in effect, to find something worth dying for in your life rather than something that brings you benefits. The only way to keep your life is to find something worth your sacrifice of it.

This, my friends, is really the only way life really works. Unless I can name names or name values I would die for, I never live profoundly.

Jesus is saying, to himself and to us, that even if you gain everything, the whole world, you have nothing if you give up your identity, your authenticity, your honesty, your compassion, your courage for it. Jesus has come to terms with the fact that he will die rather than become the kind of Messiah others want even if it brings him death rather than control of Jerusalem, the Temple, the Sanhedrin? If you lose yourself, all you gain are dust and ashes and they will suffocate you, take away the oxygen of who you were meant to be. Sometimes you are buried by the money and the financial ledgers, the honors and the possessions – buried so deeply that you can never rise up to love or care for others, to the joy of being an honest person who lives and speaks the truth. Sometimes you are so defined by all you have that there is no there in you anymore. If they are taken away, you commit suicide, losing your life to the illusions that made you think you were nothing without them. When others hear of such a death, they may feel it is sad or tragic but they do not weep or feel the loss.

In the death of Jesus, human history feels the loss so that millennia later people still weep for what was done to him. We also rejoice in the life he had lived and lost because that life is given to preserve the true value of the human heart. When Jesus dies, the triumphant human spirit prevails. Jesus dies but his humanity does not, a humanity so rich and true that immediately people conclude he was not the Messiah only but much more than that.

In his victory, we prevail.

To be a disciple of Jesus is to understand and accept all this.