

HOMILY 21ST SUNDAY AUGUST 23, 2020

I have been on retreat several times with the Trapists at the Genesee Abby in New York. This takes you totally out of your comfort zone. You are away from home and you get a very simple room in a retreat house. There is no talking allowed, even during meals. You can attend Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours every day with the Trapists. The day starts at 2:00 AM with the Office of Readings and ends with grand silence at 7:00 PM when the Trapists go to bed. You are away from home, no distractions, away from friends and family and totally out of your normal routine. Just you and God so you have time for prayer and discernment.

I think that is where we find the disciples in the Gospel reading today. They are away from home at Caesarea Philippi, gentile territory. There is a forest of temples to the pagan gods there that the Gentiles worshiped. The disciples were all raised in a Jewish environment; they were very much out of their comfort zone and totally out of their normal routine. Jesus brings them there because he has a very important question to ask them and he does not want them to have any distractions. He asks them: “Who do you say that I am?” And Simon Peter responds, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Good answer! Jesus responds, “You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church.” And then he gives him his commission and makes him the first Pope. Why did Jesus pick Peter? He was not a powerful leader. He was not educated. He was not even very bright. The majority of the time that we encounter him in the Gospels he is clueless. Today’s reading is an exception. He chose Peter because of his faith and I think he also chose Peter to make it clear that we were not following Peter. We are following Jesus. Jesus said, “Upon this rock I will build my church.” He did not say your church. We are not to follow Peter, we are not to follow Pope Francis, we are not to follow a

priest or a particular law minister. We are always following Jesus Christ. Others will help guide us but we are all following Jesus. Because human beings are in leadership roles in the Church, the Church is not perfect. There is a human face of the Church. That is why we have to keep going back to Jesus.

Today Jesus is asking each of us, “Who do you say I am.” If I asked each of you individually, you would probably all give an answer similar to Simon Peter. And if you really believe it, Jesus will give you a commission on how to live your faith. We are all out of our comfort zone during this time of the pandemic. We are not quite on retreat. We are at home, probably more than normal, but in many ways we are separated from many of our friends and relatives and we are also out of our routine these days. Nothing is normal right now. Many of us have more free time than normal so it is a good time to pray and explore how we are living out our Christian life. When this pandemic is over, and it will be over, what changes are you going to make when we can come out of semi isolation?

I think some of us have come to terms with our own mortality and what will happen when we die because with the coronavirus, that is becoming more real. People have asked me, “Fr. Jim, do you think people will come back to Church when all of this is over?” I think people are hungry for the Eucharist, hungry to come together for public worship, to pray and to sing, and hungry to join together as a community. One of the things that I miss most during this time is my Parish Family and coming together as we used to be able to do. We cannot do that yet. Dispensation has been extended through November 22nd. People 65 years of age and people with chronic medical conditions should stay away from large gatherings and stay safe, but we will be able to join together again at some time in the future, and I want everyone to be

healthy and able to be with us when that happens. Should you plan to be a more active member of our Parish Family? How can you better love and serve you friends, your family, and our community. How can you help to spread the Good News of the Gospel? What is really important in your life? I bet it has nothing to do with money and stuff. I think this is a really good time to reassess our values with Jesus in prayer.

And I firmly believe that Jesus is working through all of this all of the time. It is not evident to us now exactly what he is doing. After this is all over and we look back on this time, we will be able to see some of the ways that God was present, but we will never have a complete understanding. In the first reading we hear the question, “Who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor?” We are reminded that no one has figured out the mind of God and no one should presume to give God advice. We need have faith in God. We each need to discern what God is calling us to do each day and then leave the big picture to God.