

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Romans 11:33-36 and Matthew 16:13-20

Counter-cultural as it seems, the regular practice of paying attention to God is essential to becoming our truest selves. Pope Francis talks about this in his lovely *Gaudete et exsultate*.

Each saint is a mission, planned by the Father to reflect and embody, at a specific moment in history, a certain aspect of the Gospel... You too need to see the entirety of your life as a mission. Try to do so by listening to God in prayer and recognizing the signs that he gives you. Always ask the Spirit what Jesus expects from you at every moment of your life and in every decision you must make, so as to discern its place in the mission you have received. Allow the Spirit to forge in you the personal mystery that can reflect Jesus Christ in today's world. (19, 23)

In this week's gospel, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" The common perception was that he was a prophet – special, yes, but not unusual. When Jesus asked how the disciples themselves saw him, Peter identified Jesus as the Christ, i.e. the human chosen by God to restore Israel, and as the Son of the living God, i.e. divine. Jesus responded, "Blessed are you... for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father." Notice that Peter recognized what others couldn't because God showed him the depth of Jesus' identity.

Who are we more like, those who could only see Jesus as a really good guy or Peter who noticed God saving the world through Jesus? The answer we give with our voices may be, "We are full-fledged followers of Christ!" Then there is the answer we may be giving with our lives: "Sometimes God does not do what we want/need, so we must take care of ourselves." This practical atheism appears when we are anxious and despairing, as if nothing good is happening or even possible. It appears when we choose aggression as a way to solve problems, as if peace-making is unrealistic. It appears when we assume people who are different from us are a threat, as though God could not find a way for everyone to flourish. To nurture true belief we need to take time to sit with God with our concerns and say, "What are you doing with us here?" We need more time to listen for God's answer. We must gratefully notice where God has done good in each day and as we practice, we will see more and more good. Fascinatingly, we will begin to see places to jump into God's work and have the courage to do so. Without that practice however, we will be annoyed with God, disappointed or even dismissive of God.

The second reading, where Paul exclaims over God's power, could be a daily prayer for us that might cultivate a Peter-like awareness of God. After five chapters of telling us that God alone saves, Paul spends three more chapters addressing the sad fact that some Jews did not let God save them and the temptation Gentiles might have to think they are somehow superior because they *did* let God save them. Paul's point with everyone is that nothing we do impacts the fact that God is all about saving. "For from God and through God and for God are all things." We are in God, period. Our life's work is to contemplate that and live out of it. Eye on the prize, everyone!

In the context of Peter's grace-filled declaration, Jesus gave him his mission. Because Peter called Jesus the son of the *living* God, Peter was made the foundation on which all Christians can stand up to death, represented by the gates of Hades, where all dead people, good or bad, were believed to go. Peter recognized God's essential quality and so could be for others a basis of belief in God/Life. Peter is also to be the keeper of the keys to the kingdom of heaven. We are not really sure what the powers to bind and loose mean, although the terms are used in rabbinic Judaism for those who decide when an obligation should be followed. Perhaps Matthew's community, separating itself from Judaism and scrambling for a theological and moral leader, was setting Peter up with similar powers. Whatever it means, it sounds pretty intimidating. How will Peter decide these things? How will he believe so thoroughly in the power of God/Life that the whole Church will do so as well? This is Peter's specific mission to be realized in God. The practical atheist does not know what that means. Do we?

- ❖ In what part of your life do you most need to grow in awareness of God?
- ❖ What aspect of the Gospel has God commissioned you to embody?