

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A – August 23, 2026 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 7:15, 8:30, and 11:00am Sunday Masses – 890 words

“But who do you say that I am?” Christ’s question to Simon Peter, he effectively repeats to each and every one of us down through history. And we have to understand that we are answering this question at a very different point in history than Peter was. There was still doubt about Jesus then; there is none now. Some cast him into doubt, sure, but we know that’s all been refuted. We know that Jesus is real. So how might we answer?

Well, hopefully with a deeply personal response, as one speaking to the beloved. Not all have, or are at least striving, for that personal relationship, though. They reduce the gospel to a generic morality. Faced with deep questions like this, they respond, “I’m basically a good person; I haven’t killed anyone...”. But if the extent of our relationship with God is that we haven’t done anything that merits prison, we might not be saved.

Think of the scene in Matthew chapter 7, where Christ speaks about how we must not only hear his word but put it into practice. And he speaks of those who claimed to do so, yet to whom he ultimately responded, “Depart from me, I never knew you.” – for they had not truly known him. They had not sought to know his will and to do it; their relationship with him had been one of utility, at best – a superficial one.

Or there’s the passage of Luke chapter 13, where he speaks of how we must enter through the narrow gate. Some won’t make it and will knock on the door and beg to enter, even protesting how they had eaten and drank with the Lord – in our case, it would be about how we had gone to Mass and received Holy Communion. And he would say to them, too, “I tell you, I do not know where you come from; depart from me!”

Yes, he says to us, too: “Who do you say that I am?” And he looks for a personal response: the response of a disciple, of one who seeks to follow – to know, to love, to serve. Not of one who is merely nice – “a good person” –, or only casually acquainted, or disinterested in his saving plan. His ways are no doubt very mysterious, as the second reading taught: “Who has known the mind of the Lord?” But we must at least try!

And that part about “trying” is key. Think about Peter’s journey in the gospel, from being a willful, impulsive fisherman, unsure who this Jesus was; to claiming he would never abandon him; to being the second to do so (after Judas); then ultimately, to dying as a martyr for him. How many times he must have thought in his prayers, “Who are you, Lord? Where are you leading me?”! Even toward the end of his life...

Yet even if the answers were not always clear and he had to pass through dark valleys, so to speak, he learned along the way that the Good Shepherd was always at his side, leading him all the same. So he strove to preserve that communion; he kept asking his questions in prayer, no doubt; he kept trying to respond well. “But he was the first pope!”, you say. “Surely God spoke to him directly every day! He could not have doubted!”

Well, to that I respond, never forget the story of “Quo vadis”. As you leave the great city of Rome on the ancient Appian Way, which is still there today, there is a little church with that title on it. The story goes that Peter had grown overwhelmed by the persecution of Christians and was fleeing the city. Jesus appeared to him. And he said to Jesus (in Latin, as one did back then), “Domine, quo vadis?” – Lord, where are you going?

And Jesus responded: “I am going to Rome, to be crucified again”. As if to say, “I am close to my people: I know them, and they know me; I will suffer with them.” Peter immediately repented – perhaps even weeping bitterly, as in the gospel after he had denied Christ – and he turned back. Things were not always clear, even for the pope. He made mistakes. But his heart was with Jesus, and he followed him wherever he led.

In closing, this same gospel teaches us about how Christ founded the church upon Peter's profession of faith. The Church is where we most surely meet Jesus. The Church's sacraments give us security in our walk with him. He isn't calling us to be a generically nice person or to know who he is from afar, but to enter in. "Who do you say that I am?" Our response may well be at times, "Lord, who are you? Lord, where are you leading me?"

But we also go to confession and receive forgiveness for our sins and strengthening in God's grace; we receive his very life in Holy Communion – and of course, the help of the other sacraments, too; we seek to follow his Church's teachings; we strive to do works of charity and live out our faith; and we endeavor to keep up with daily prayer. If we do this, when he comes to ask us this question personally, we will be ready to respond well.