

Twenty fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Where things happen for us is often quite significant. In these days I have been thinking about the places and the people that have been significant for me in my priestly journey. Those of you who are married no doubt remember where you met and where you celebrated your wedding.

We notice that Jesus makes his way right up to the northern tip of the land of Israel. He is in the villages on the edge of a city that had been rebuilt by Philip the Tetrarch and renamed after him and the emperor. Jesus chooses Caesarea Philippi, near one of the sources of the Jordan River, to begin his journey towards Jerusalem. But it is more than just a physical journey. As he begins this journey, he asks his disciples to tell him who people say he is. It made sense that some thought of him as being John the Baptist reincarnated, others the Prophet Elijah returned to earth, and others the Prophet that God promised he would send. But all this was in the head. To talk about what others thought was not enough. Jesus needed to know how his own disciples related to him. “Who do you say I am?” Who am I for you? What does it mean to be in relationship with me? These are really the central questions of the gospel. They are the questions that every baptised Christian needs to answer if the Church is to have a future.

Peter speaks for the others without consulting them. “You are the Christ”. Mark does not elaborate on Peter’s simple words as Matthew does. But he goes on to say that Jesus gave them strict orders not to tell anyone about him. He was in danger of being misunderstood and acclaimed as a temporal leader who would lead a popular revolt against the Roman occupation of Israel. Jesus affirms that he is the Christ, the anointed one of God. But quickly makes clear to them the kind of Christ he is.

“He began to teach them that the Son of Man was destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and to be put to death, and after three days to rise again.” When Peter heard that, he was convinced that Jesus had it all wrong. How could the anointed one of God be made to undergo rejection, suffering and death? It was too early for Peter to notice that Jesus also spoke of rising from the dead. What Peter had hoped would be a private affair between himself and Jesus, Jesus made into an opportunity to teach all who would choose to follow him. Jesus goes beyond talking about his own suffering and tells us all that the cost of being his disciple would be that we must share in his suffering. “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me.” There is no room among the disciples of Jesus for people who are selfish. We can’t call ourselves

disciples of Jesus unless we are ready to be like him in the way that we reach out in love to others. “The one who wants to save his life, that one will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Today we are joined by some young people who are beginning to prepare for their Confirmation and First Holy Communion. They will also be celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Sacrament of God’s healing forgiveness. Today they are remembering the beginning of their journey of faith. They are remembering the day when their parents brought them to the waters of Baptism. Getting ready for today’s ritual, the children have been listening to the story of what happened when they were baptized. Most of them were too small to say anything then, except for a little crying of protest when the water was poured over them. But today they will say something. They have heard enough about Jesus to say that they want to keep learning about him. They have learnt enough about praying to be able to make a promise that they will pray to Jesus every day. We will be asked to support them and their families by our prayer and example.

This is happening on a day that we set aside each year to focus in on the safety of children in our community. This year we are calling it Safeguarding Sunday. As a Church

community we want children to feel that they have an important part to play in who we are. We want them to feel that their presence here and the gifts that they share with us are important.

That some of them have remembered their Baptism today reminds us of who we are. But we know that to say that we have been baptised is not enough. We need to earn the right to call ourselves Christians. Not in the sense that we go out and do great things on our own. But in the sense that we keep listening for the ways that Jesus moves us and empowers us to make his love present in our world. The question that Jesus asks, “Who do you say I am?” is such an important question for all of us. Who Jesus is for us makes a difference to the way that we can be for others. If we know that relationship of love that Jesus has for us, then we are tapped into the love that we are called to share with others. If Jesus is the source of our hope, then we can be a beacon of hope for others. If we have learned how to put our trust in Jesus, then others can put their trust in us.