



21st Sunday in Ordinary Time – Homily

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
Sunday, 24 August 2014

Last Friday evening, here in St Mary's Cathedral, three young men were ordained as deacons for our Archdiocese. They have been prepared for this momentous event in their lives at our missionary seminary here in Perth, Redemptoris Mater in Morley. All three have come from overseas and have, with great courage and self-sacrifice, offered themselves to the Lord and His Church here in our Archdiocese.

If all goes well, they will be ordained next year as priests, and I invite you to keep them in your prayers. But, for the moment, their attention is focused on what they are called to be and to do as deacons. They will only eventually prove to be good priests if they now show themselves to be good deacons, men whose lives are based on the example of Jesus who said of Himself, "I have come not to be served, but to serve".

In my homily on Friday evening, I reflected briefly on the existence and meaning of the Church: I did so because men only become deacons because they are called by God, into the Church first of all and then, within the community of the Church, called again by God to put their lives at the service of God's people. This is also true, of course, for priests and bishops but it is, in fact, true for every single Christian.

God does not call people to find their way to Him alone, as isolated individuals; he calls them to become members of His community of disciples, members of His Church. As St Paul reminds us in his first letter to the Corinthians (cf Holy Bible, 1 Corinthians 12, verse 27), we who are baptised are members of the Body of Christ, inseparably connected to each other. This means that we belong to each other, that we are mutually responsible for each other, and that we must work together to be who the Lord is asking us to be and needs us to be: the living and powerful and effective sign that He, the Lord, is present and active in our world. This is the common and shared vocation we all have.

The importance of the Church comes through very clearly in today's Gospel (Holy Bible, Gospel of Matthew 16, verses 13-20). It is a Gospel very familiar to us as Catholics for it helps us to understand the nature of the Church and, in particular, the role of St Peter and those who have succeeded him in the long history of the Church down to our present day with Pope Francis.



“You are Peter,” Jesus says to the man who up until then had been called Simon, “and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it”. It is our conviction as Catholics that the role of Peter, the role of the Pope, is essential for the life of the Church.

Later in the Gospel, when Jesus is facing His death and knows that Peter will betray Him, He reverts for a moment to the name Simon and says to him, "Simon, Simon, I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when you have turned back again, must strengthen your brothers." This faith of Peter and of Peter's successors which, though fragile, is ultimately solid and reliable because it is the result of God's grace at work in him, is the rock on which the Church is built. The Pope protects and proclaims the faith of the Church and, in doing so, strengthens all of us in our faith.

Today's Gospel, and the wider context in which it is set, can help us understand what faith is really all about – not just Peter's faith, or the Church's faith, but our faith too. Shortly, in our liturgy, I will invite you all to proclaim your faith as we recite the *Creed* – but what is it that we proclaim?

In today's Gospel, Jesus asks His disciples, for whom Peter is the spokesperson, what other people are saying about Him. It is as if Jesus is asking His disciples, “Who am I for these people who come to listen to me, to touch me, to seek my help, to witness a miracle?” The answers He gets to this question must have been a disappointment to Him.

The people have realised that He is someone special, certainly a man of God, but they have missed the deeper truth completely. Jesus isn't Moses, or Elijah, or one of the prophets. He is so much more. When Jesus then asks the disciples, “What about you, who do you say I am?”, Peter, speaking on their behalf and expressing their common faith, says quite plainly, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God”. Because of a special gift of God, Peter has understood the deeper truth about Jesus: this is the reason why Jesus then says that it is on Peter, the rock, that He will build his Church.

While these reflections can help us to deepen our appreciation of the role of the Pope in our journey of faith, they can also help us realise how important it is to do all we can to find ourselves in the same position as Peter. He was able, with God's grace, to grasp the truth about Jesus. We do not want to be in the same position as the crowds. They had some idea about Jesus but their beliefs and understandings were only partial and inadequate. They couldn't really commit themselves fully to Jesus because they didn't really know Him. It will be the same for us.

The question of today's Gospel, then, is one that is addressed to each of us, not just individually but also as members of the Church, sharers in the faith of the Church: Who do you say that I am? The question matters for it is Jesus Himself who tells us that He is the Way, He is the Truth, and He is the Life. If we want to walk along the right way, really know the truth, and have life to the full, then we need to know, and love and serve Jesus – but it must be the *real* Jesus,



not the Jesus of our own creating. It must be the Jesus we meet in the Gospels and who is proclaimed by the Church. This morning, let us hear Him say to us, "Who do you say I am?" We must search our hearts for an answer: let us hope the answer will not disappoint Him.