



Second Sunday Ordinary Time (Year B)

Homily

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**Sunday 14 January, 2024
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

In this morning's gospel, which tells the story of the very first encounter between Jesus and some of the men who will become part of the group of His twelve apostles, we find Jesus asking these men a very important question: *what do you want?* The response these men give to Jesus might seem rather strange to us: *Rabbi, where do you live?*

In fact, it is a very normal question for Jewish people at that time to ask of someone whom they have identified as a Rabbi. A Rabbi or Teacher gathered disciples together and taught them in his own home. By asking where He lived, these men were indicating to Jesus that they wanted Him to be their rabbi. Jesus accepts this and simply says to them, "Come and see".

These men had been, up until that moment, disciples of John the Baptist, and it seems that they had hoped that he might be the Messiah. When John made it very clear that he was not, and that in fact Jesus was the one they were looking for, they immediately switched their allegiance to Jesus. In John's gospel, this takes place at the very start of the public ministry of Jesus, and so it is understandable that these first disciples of Jesus were not able to see anything in Him other than a wise teacher, who might possibly even be the Messiah for whom the Jewish people had waited so long.

Things begin to change when one of the men, Andrew, tells his brother Simon that he believes he had found the Messiah, and so Simon comes along with Andrew, probably out of curiosity, to see what the fuss was all about. It is then that something unexpected happens. As we have just heard, when Jesus meets Simon, he looks hard at him and then says, "*You are Simon, son of John; you are to be called Cephas - which means rock*". And as we know the word *rock* in Latin is *Petra*, and in English is *Peter*.

Rabbis did not normally give their disciples new names. In changing Simon's name to Peter, Jesus is indicating that something completely new is about to unfold for Simon and indeed for all the others who gather around Simon, now Peter, who will become the leader of the group of the twelve.

As the rest of the gospel of John unfolds, Peter and the other disciples of Jesus will be constantly surprised by Jesus as they come to realise that He is so much more than just another Rabbi.



Eventually, they will also realise that while He is, indeed, the long-awaited Messiah, He is a Messiah in a way that they had not expected. Most of the Jewish people of that time were looking for a powerful liberator who would free them from the hated Roman occupation. They certainly were not looking for a Messiah who would live in poverty and simplicity, and who would eventually be put to death as a betrayer of his own people. No wonder so many found it hard to believe in Jesus.

The question Jesus puts to His first disciples is repeated, although in a slightly different way, in another encounter Jesus has later in the gospels, this time in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is by now much better known, and although most people still struggle to understand who He really is, they certainly knew that He is different from anyone they have encountered before. As the ministry of Jesus unfolded, many people noted that unlike some of the scribes and Pharisees, the Jewish leaders of that time, Jesus seemed to teach with a new kind of authority. People had also realised, because of the miracles he worked, that Jesus was indeed a man of God in a way that they had never experienced before.

It is in this context that, when a blind man calls out to Jesus, Jesus turns to him and says not simply *“What do you want?”* but rather *“What do you want me to do for you?”* Jesus knew that the man was blind, and so His question was in a sense unnecessary, but it seems that it was important for Jesus that the man name the gift for which he was seeking. In doing so - in saying to Jesus, *“Lord, let me see again”* - the man is acknowledging publicly not just his urgent need, but his inability to do anything about that need himself. Even more, he is expressing his faith in Jesus who he believes can do for him what he simply cannot do for himself. And so, Jesus says to him, *“Receive your sight: your faith has saved you”*.

The question which Jesus put to those first disciples, and which He expanded on and used again in His encounter with the blind man, is the very same question which Jesus puts to each one of us: *what do you want me to do for you?*

Like those first disciples, and like the blind man, Jesus is inviting us to respond from the reality of our own lives, our own struggles, our own dreams. But unlike the first disciples, we know that Jesus is so much more than a wise teacher or reliable guide. And unlike the blind man whom Jesus meets later in His ministry, we know that Jesus is more than simply a miracle worker, a healer of broken bodies. Jesus, as our recently concluded annual celebration of Christmas reminds us, is God among us as one of us. And as Pope Francis reminds us so often, Jesus is, in a very particular way, the face of our heavenly Father’s mercy.

Perhaps, then, when Jesus turns to us and says, *“What do you want me to do for you?”* our answer might well be the prayer which was on the lips of the sinner in one of Jesus’s parables: *Lord, have pity on me a sinner.*



Just as the blind man had to recognise his own inability to do anything about his blindness, so we must recognise the brokenness and sinfulness of our lives, turn to the Lord in humility and in honesty, and ask for his forgiveness and his healing. This morning's second reading speaks about this reality of sin in people's lives, and for most of us our own experience teaches us that we can easily get trapped in patterns of sinful behaviour which distance us from God, bring suffering to those we love, and leave us distressed and unsettled as we realise how far we are from being the people God created us to be.

What do you want me to do for you? What do you need me to do for you? These are the questions which today's liturgy invites us to put to ourselves. If we can find it within ourselves to be honest and open with the Lord, then, in his own way and in his own time, He will say to us, as he said to the blind man, *"Receive back your sight. Be whole again. Your faith has saved you."*