

Proper 7

Saturday @ 5:00 pm; Sunday @ 8:00 & 10:00 am

Luke 9:18-24 “...and who do you say that I am?”

(Introduction of Dick?)

Alcoholics Anonymous, or AA, is the name of a group of men and women who acknowledge that substance abuse and addiction to alcoholism is ruining their lives. The victims of this illness have reached a point where they admit to themselves, and to others, the need for help. Their purpose in coming together is to give witness to their illness, share their constant battle with it, and assist and support others to do the same. Those attending AA meetings do so because it is realized they cannot pull this off by themselves. They believe in the need for each other. They believe in the need of God. The one's who aren't so sure about God speak instead of a higher power.

When individuals first attend an AA meeting, they introduce themselves saying, “I am John. I am an alcoholic.” Or, “I am Mary. I am an alcoholic.” To such introductions, the rest of the group responds in unison, “Hi, John, Hi Mary.” Immediate acceptance is voiced, for they all have one and the same common denominator – alcoholism. AA meetings are apt to end their sessions with the Lord's Prayer or the Serenity Prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. Apart from that, there is no ritual or sorts. There are no dues; no budget. They do not advertise nor proselytize. Having no buildings of their own, Alcoholics Anonymous meet wherever they can.

No one lectures them, and they do not lecture one another. They simply tell their own story and do so with candor that anonymity

makes possible. Did you notice that the introductions did not include a last name? Anonymity is respected. The stories told share where the individual went wrong, and how, day by day, he or she is trying to make it right. They share where they find strength, understanding, and the hope to keep trying to do right. Often, one will take responsibility for another – to act as a sponsor – making themselves available at any hour of the day or night, whenever need arises. There is not much more to it than that, however, it seems to be sufficient. Healing happens. Miracles are made.

I know. I have witnessed these miracles. St. Stephen's sponsors an Alcoholics Anonymous group. I spoke frequently with members of that group. I have heard many of their stories. And each one admitted that whatever success they have achieved in battling the demon of alcoholism, they readily acknowledge not being able to do it alone.

Why am I sharing this with you this morning? I believe today's gospel passage from Luke contains one of the most profound, if not the most profound passage, in all of scripture. And that this passage has direct links to what I just shared.

The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand just occurred. Afterwards and alone, off by themselves, Jesus and the disciples are praying. In the spirit of prayer, Jesus asks his followers, "Who do people say that I am?" This question was directed to the opinions of the outside world, directed to those who did not know Jesus personally. It was a question inviting the opinion of others, such as those 5,000 who were just miraculously fed. To those who do not know Christ personally might resort to what movies, books, radio, TV, or what they heard in sermons say about Jesus. The answers received were exactly what Jesus was expecting; didn't come close to being accurate.

Jesus then followed up with the \$64.000 question, “But who do *you* say that I am? I am standing here before you, face-to-face. Look into my eyes. What do you see? Who do you see? Do you see what everyone else sees – some mortal human being representing the past? Tell me, who do you say that I am?”

We are not told if there was dead silence at this point – the disciples pondering Jesus’ question.

Then, literally out of the clear blue sky - Peter responded, (*slowly said*) “You are the Christ of God.” (*Pause*)

You and I have heard and or read this passage many times in our lives. And I would dare say that most of us probably just continued on reading without pausing to assess the significance of what was just said by Peter. One of the disadvantages for us is that we *think* we know the story. After all, we have heard it or read it many times. Maybe we even heard a sermon or two about it. And because of our familiarity with this story, little emotion or reaction occurs. Our hearts do not skip a beat or two; our blood pressure level hardly flickers.

I believe what we just read is one of the most profound passages in all of scripture. Peter is the first disciple; Peter is the first human being to confess that “Jesus is the Christ of God.” Matthew 16:16 records Peter stating, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Never before has such a statement been made, not even by Jesus himself.

You and I have heard this statement many times, and Peter’s answer seems self-evident. But such is not the case here, for this declaration is stated for the first time 2,000 years ago. And as to the nature of Peter’s response, of all the possible answers that could have been given, Peter’s answer was the greatest stretch of

responses, the most unanticipated, the seemingly most far out response that could have been given. It was so far out of the expected realm of responses that Jesus said to Peter, "...flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." (Goose bumps)

The thoughts of other people, and even Peter's *own* thoughts, were not able to give the correct response to the question put to them. Jesus shared with Peter that the words he voiced were not his own, but rather were the Words of God the Father through him.

And those words forever altered the self-perception of the disciples; forever altered the awareness of who they believed themselves to be standing before the Christ of God. Jesus asked a question pertaining how others perceived who he was and the disciples find themselves learning who they are, and, more importantly, who truly is standing before them.

Possibly for the first time, what were the disciples realizations about themselves? What is the deep and significant meaning to the response Peter gave, a response that evoked not only an awed acknowledgment, but also a blessing from Jesus?

"You are the Christ of God." From Matthew, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." One thing that puzzles me is that neither one of these two statements is punctuated with an exclamation mark that would indicate a more intense feeling. Apparently, Peter made his statement quite serenely, as a statement of fact. None of Peter's impulsiveness was revealed. He made a clear and concise statement; one we ought to reflect upon frequently, especially in these spiritually troubled times.

Peter's statement included quite a revelation for not only himself, but also for his fellow disciples. *Jesus – the Christ of God; the Son of the Living God.* Peter's statement is a confession that Jesus is

God, that Jesus is the long-awaited Incarnate One; that God the Father's Christ are one, and one only. Jesus is **the** Christ; not *a* Christ, but **the** Christ – only one Christ; only one Messiah, only one savior, only one healer; only he and he alone has as His Father – God who is in heaven.

Awesome!

And the Christ is standing before them!! Standing in their midst. And has been for nearly three years! Wow!

Jesus is God's sole Christ. Jesus is God's sole Anointed One. Something we need to keep in mind. Jesus did not have a last name as you and I do. Ancient Jewish custom would dictate that Jesus would be known as Jesus, Son of God, the Christ.

Please note Peter's words, "You are the **Christ** of God." The term *Christ* means, among many other terms: anointed one; savior; Lord; Messiah; teacher; healer; Incarnate one; Holy one of God; God with us. More accurately, Jesus ought to be addressed as: Jesus, the Savior; Jesus, the Anointed One; Jesus, the Holy One of God. Isn't this what Jesus was proclaimed to be at his birth: Savior, Christ, Lord, eternal King?

The ark of the Old Covenant was to the people a sacramental symbol of God's presence with them. Jesus is the ark of the new covenant not as a represented symbol, but one who personally, in the flesh, is God's presence with us – our Emmanuel. The disciples suddenly are made aware of the presence and power of God. Truly a moment of truth for them. In one awesome moment, the disciples were made aware of their standing before God the Son.

I am going to ask you a question hoping that you will be true to yourself as you reflect upon an answer. You are standing face to face with Jesus, the Christ. How would you re-act? What would be going on inside of you? Would there be a sense of powerlessness, a profound reality of humility suddenly gripping you? Does a holy fear dwell up within you, a fear that requires confession and forgiveness? Is there a sense that standing before you is hope and salvation; that standing before you is the great shepherd to lead you into eternal life? Is there a sense of awesome power and authority standing before you, without which salvation and eternal life in the kingdom cannot be achieved?

Without Jesus, the Christ, there is no hope of forgiveness or salvation. We cannot do it ourselves. Before Isaiah said those now very well known words, "Here am I, send me," he confessed to the Lord that he is a man of unclean lips, a sinner before Yahweh God. Isaiah knew the One before whom he stood; that what he heard was indeed the voice of the Lord. Standing before God, all the window dressing we acquired in life suddenly comes shattering down, revealing who we truly are - sinners. It is then, we realize that our hope for forgiveness and eternal life lies not within ourselves, but in Him who came to us, who offered himself upon the cross for yours and my sins, Jesus - the Christ.

Reflecting upon the model of Alcoholic Anonymous, we stand before Jesus to say, "Lord, my name is Richard. I am a sinner, and I need your help." To which Jesus responds, "Richard, your sins are forgiven. And I cry, "Alleluia! Thank you, Jesus!" Only the Christ is able to forgive. Only the Christ promises eternal life.

We are sinners who have a Savior to whom we can turn to for help, the same Jesus, the Christ, who stood before Peter and the others. This same Christ stands before you and me. Invite him into your heart. It is not our national heritage; it is not our gender or station in life that is important. Paul so stated this in the passage from

Galatians read this morning. What is important is to acknowledge who we really are, and that with and through Jesus, the Christ, we are able to be forgiven.

I close with a verse from Jeremiah 29:11, a verse not only appropriate for our thoughts today, but also quite appropriate for our high school seniors graduating this weekend, among whom is our grandson, Jonathon. Jeremiah writes, “For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

And the people of God said, “Amen!”