

Twenty-Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time - B (2021)

Isaiah 50:5-9

James 2:14-18

Mark 8:27-35

“Jesus asked them, ‘Who do you say that I am?’”

This question of our Lord brings to mind a short story by the well known British writer, G.K. Chesterton. He died just a little over seventy-five years ago now. And, among his works, was one about a man who seemed to have it all. He was quite wealthy; he was known by a lot of people; and he seemed to be liked by everyone. And what made him most popular was not that he freely shared his wealth, but that he was always in good humour and in an upbeat mood. If you were depressed when you went to see him, you were not depressed when you left. No one ever really asked how he managed to be so positive all the time. They just thought that that was the way he was.

Well, one day, without warning and to everyone’s surprise, he was found dead. No one could understand who would want to do this to such a man. Well, the answer turned out to be that no one had done this to him; he had taken his own life. And no one could understand that until some pieces began to fall into place. His notes told that there had been another side to the man, a side which struggled every bit as much as everyone else. He also was sometimes afraid; he also worried; he also wept. But that side he wanted no one to see – and no one ever did see it. His image remained intact. But the strength needed to maintain that charade became too great — and finally he could no longer cope. So he took the only path that he could see open to him. Thus, Chesterton’s story.

If we look even briefly at this Gospel, we have to notice that our Lord refused to play that game. He was not influenced by what other people thought of him, and he made no effort to be other than who he was. He was not John the Baptist, and he said so. He was not Elijah, and he said so. Nor was he any other prophet of old. Our Lord had no intention of living up to – or down to – the expectations made by another; he would not do it. If he had done so, he might have lived longer, but he would also have been living a lie – and he would have forfeited his integrity. That price he would not pay. Nor should we – ever.

The man in Chesterton's story and this Gospel of our Lord remind us of something that can touch us all, a weakness to which we are sometimes tempted; and that is, the temptation to be someone whom we are not. That effort may take different forms. Perhaps we are like the man in the story. We just do not let people in, even those who should be closest to us – and may think that they are. Sometimes, we go a little further and deny even to ourselves who we are and what we have become. Then, even looking in a mirror can become an act of courage. And, sometimes, this denial can mean that we do not follow a dream because others may not think that it is right for us. In one form or another, we have become the man in the story.

This Gospel is, I think, a plea that we be honest with ourselves in other ways, as well. It may be asking us to acknowledge that something, such as the use of alcohol or another drug, is becoming a problem – but we are refusing to admit it. Maybe it is a marriage which is heading toward a problem – but we are both refusing to acknowledge it and get help. Perhaps we are gradually letting go of a principle or ideal which we said that we would never do. Or there could be a member of our

family with a special need – but we are refusing to accept that fact – and seek help – out of a sense of pride, or whatever.

These are, I think, the kinds of things which this Gospel invites us to consider; and so maybe we should take a moment to reflect upon them. For, bottom line, the most precious thing which we have in this world is our integrity. If we have betrayed that, any other legacy amounts to very little. Integrity is everything.

That, I think, is the lesson of Chesterton's character, and it is surely one of the lessons of this Gospel. Never query the cost of selling integrity – for it can have no price. That, I think, is the message of the line ...

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