

Gospel text

Matthew 16: 21-28

13 When Jesus arrived in the region of Caesarea of Philippi, he began to question his disciples in this way: "How do people perceive the new Adam?" 14 These respond: "Some see him as John the Baptist, others like Elijah, and still others like Jeremiah or one of the prophets". 15 Then Jesus asked them, "But what am I for you?" 16 Peter spoke to answer, "You are the messiah, the son of the living God". 17 Jesus reacts by saying, "Bravo, Simon son of Jonah, for it was not the conditions of your human nature that led you to discover this, but my father who lives in the beyond, 18 and I am telling you that you are Peter, and on this stone I will build my community of believers, and the doors of the world of the dead will never close on it. 19 I will give you the keys that open to the world of God, and so what you will be demanding will be the mirror what is demanded in the world of God, and what you will allow in this world will be the mirror what is allowed in the world of God". 20 From that time Jesus commanded his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the messiah.

Gospel commentary - Homily

Can religion caricature God?

Nigeria, this country in West Africa, has something really special: people identify themselves first by their religion, and their citizenship comes only second. Even if there are as many Christians as Muslims there, the government tries to subject everyone to Islamic sharia law. There are estimated to be around 20,000 people killed in the name of God since 1990. But let's not immediately condemn Islam. In Sri Lanka a conflict continues between Buddhists and Muslims.

Meanwhile, Christians are angry in Canada over the issue of homosexuality and the Anglican Church of Canada is on the verge of a schism. A scholar of religions recently said that historians may someday claim that religion was the first life-giving and destructive force of this century. How to explain all this? With the globalization of communications and rapid cultural changes, are we not experiencing a form of identity crisis?

This context allows us to get to the heart of this Sunday Gospel topic. "Who am I for people? Who am I for you?", said Jesus. We may ask ourselves: but why is Jesus asking this question at this time? When a man or woman asks their spouse this question, "Who am I for you?", very often it is that the relationship is experiencing a turmoil and it is necessary to clarify the whole thing. One can imagine a similar situation for Jesus and his disciples. Let's take a closer look.

A conflict has broken out between Jesus and the Pharisees, these devout Jewish lay people, because Jesus' disciples do not wash their hands when they eat their meals. Hand or body ablutions are among the many requirements of religious law. Jesus responds by affirming that this religious law does not come from God, but from a human tradition. He even goes further. Many so-called religious laws are against what God wants. For example, one will donate to the temple as required by law, and neglect to care for parents who need help. He therefore concluded with this word to the disciples, "Stay away from the influence of the Pharisees and Sadducees, this priestly family associated with the temple". How do you think the disciples of Jesus feel? They are full of religious fervor, but facing the attitude of Jesus who questions a large part of their world. We then understand the relevance of Jesus' question: "Who am I for you?"

You know Peter's answer: "You are the messiah, the son of the living God". But it is not easy to grasp the full depth of this statement. This is contrasted with other famous characters: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah. All these people were considered men of God, prophets who called out to the people to guide them to God. But what Peter says goes further: "You are the very face of this God that we cannot see, you are the reflection of the source of all our lives. Let us not forget, Peter made this statement in the context of Jesus' controversies with these people who hold on to myriad religious laws. In other words, Peter says, "When you oppose all these religious men, through you it is God himself who opposes them, and it is the true image of God that you want to restore".

What is this face of God revealed by Jesus? A few days earlier, on the shore of Lake Galilee, Jesus healed the lame, the blind, the crippled and the dumb. Then, when a crowd gathers around him, he says, "I have compassion for this crowd which has been with me for three days and which is hungry. And with his disciples he managed to feed 4,000 people with the little they had.

How to understand the reaction of Jesus to Peter's faith, when he tells him that he is the stone on which he will build the community of believers and promises him the keys to the world of God so that what he will demand in this world will be the mirror of what is demanded in the world of God? Because Peter, representing authentic believers, is capable of an accurate perception of God beyond all these caricatures from human and religious traditions, he is able to guide people towards the One who is life in all its fullness.

We are experiencing profound changes at all levels. In our search for identity, there is a strong temptation to return to the formulas of the past or to harden certain religious traditions. This temptation distances us from the true face of Jesus, because we no longer trust the one Peter called "the son of the living God". True life is in the present, not in the past.