

Sunday Homily

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

12 SEPTEMBER 2021

YEAR B

“He asked them,
‘But who do you say that I am?’”

Mark 8:29

Illustration

Gossip makes the world go round. None of us can resist the latest rumours and scandals, as newspaper and magazine sales figures make clear. Even if we have ourselves been the victim of false rumours, we can't quite help believing stories about other people. “No smoke without fire” must be one of the most depressing maxims in existence, when applied to gossip. We even manage to pass on gossip with a clear conscience. We say, “I have heard... but of course I've no idea if it's true or not.” We seldom expect to be confronted with the person whose reputation is under the microscope, or to be held accountable for the truth or otherwise of the story we are helping to spread.

Gospel Teaching

Jesus' ministry was attended by a great many rumours. For a lot of the time, he was followed about by large groups of people who had heard stories about him and, in those pre-newspaper days, could only join in the gossip by being there. In the Gospels, we hear the stories of those who come into direct contact with Jesus, but we hear very little about these others, this shadowy mass of people hanging round the edges of all the action. In the tremendous whirlwind of Jesus' ministry, there isn't really time to worry about those who are just looking for a sensation. Jesus and the disciples have their hands full with potential friends and enemies, without bothering with those who don't really want anything in particular.

But in today's Gospel reading, Jesus suddenly asks his disciples what people are saying about him. The disciples answer so quickly and with so many options that it sounds as though this was a discussion they had been longing for. After all, their own reputations were bound up with Jesus'. They are thoughtful friends. They do not pass on the unkind rumours, the doubts about Jesus' sanity, the suggestions about his paternity and so on. They only pass on the acceptable gossip, and wait to hear what Jesus has to say.

But then Jesus goes to the heart of it. “Who do you say that I am?” And the disciples go quiet. It is so much easier to pass on gossip, taking no responsibility

for it, than to stand up for their own opinions. Only Peter is prepared to risk an answer, and gets very little reward for it. Technically, Peter is right. Jesus is the Messiah. But he is just as much wrong as right, because what Peter thinks is a Messiah is not at all what Jesus is going to be. Jesus is going to free his people and lead them to victory, just like a good Messiah should, but he is going to do it through suffering, and, even then, it might not end up as the kind of triumph his disciples have in mind. Peter has been so influenced by what “everyone says” a Messiah should be that he even tries to contradict Jesus. Perhaps Jesus just hasn’t read the right books and newspapers, Peter thinks, as he tries to teach Jesus what his mission should be.

But centuries of history have shown what comes of trying to do things the way “everyone knows” they should be done. In Jesus, God has come to make plain that there is only one way to change everything, and that is the way that Jesus is walking.

Application

Like the disciples, we would usually rather live with borrowed opinions than venture our own. We would prefer not to stand out against the crowd, and declare what we believe. We, too, would prefer our God to be strong and victorious, so that our own reputations can be vindicated along with his.

How very hard it is to allow God to make his own definitions. But that is just what God does in Jesus. God shows us how he defines himself, what his nature is and how he chooses to act. We can reject God, but we cannot make him be a different kind of divinity. This is God, take it or leave it. Jesus is not swayed by what others say about him, or by what his disciples long for him to be. He knows what he must do and be, for our salvation. As his followers, we must keep our eyes fixed on him, and resist any other rumours or definitions of God.